

FINGER ON THE TRIGGER

THIS is a new sort of thriller, which has its roots in actual events which took place during the bitter years of the German occupation of Warsaw. Its themes are violence, hatred, treachery—and patriotism ; and it tells of two groups of men and women, each concerned in its different way with preying upon the German overlords, and occasionally upon each other : the Underground and the Underworld. For the hero, Marek Korda, a patriot and idealist who has been betrayed by the woman collaborator he cannot bring himself to execute, becomes a member of a gangster band as the only way remaining to him of venting his hatred upon the Germans.

The author is himself a Pole, who lived through the events described and has based his characters on real people. He is able to convey with brutal realism the austere selflessness of the true patriots, whose only preoccupation was with killing Germans, and who, though endlessly pursued and tortured, kept the flame of their nationalism burning to the very end ; and, in startling contrast, the corruption, violence and lechery of the members of the Underworld who, while they cheated, robbed and killed, yet maintained, with a kind of cynical derision, an illicit luxury in their black-market dealings.

Between these two worlds Marek Korda plays out his tragic role of patriot, bandit and lover—a role which is brought to an end by the death of himself and his mistress in a Russian air-raid.

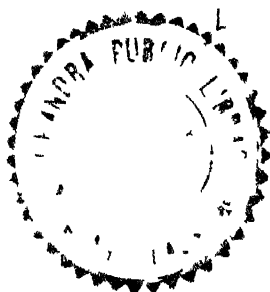
Finger On The Trigger

by

J. B. PORAY

translated from the Polish by

H C STEVENS



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I

THE FINGER resting on the bell-push hesitated for a second, the fraction of a second. Through the open staircase window came the smell of sour cabbage and the noise of a carpet being beaten. The deep, muffled voice of the house-porter, trying to persuade someone that it wasn't quite the thing to do it at twelve o'clock, when it sent dust on to other people's dinners, sounded almost like a wireless communiqué coming from a subdued, secretly working loud-speaker.

The hand shifted to the brass handle ; the door was not locked. Marek Korda entered the empty hall, quietly closed the door, and released the safety catch. A rug deadened his stealthy tread. His precautionary look around inscribed certain objects on the retina of his trained observation : a large coat-stand with mirrors, on it one lady's coat (so she had no visitors); a door wide open into the kitchen (no one moving about in there); the black plate of the glass above the bathroom (he knew the lay-out of the place by heart from his instructions); the throbbing silence all over the apartment. For a moment he thought the place must be empty : all the better, perhaps.

He did not stop to think out why he had had this reaction : straight ahead of him, the sunlight was streaming through a glass-panelled door.

Now he felt perfectly calm. His uneasiness seemed to have flowed out of him into the rug ; he had left his fears behind him. The fact that Brutus had not turned up at the centre (' what has happened to him ? It doesn't matter, I'll manage ') all his distaste for this unpleasant piece of work (' after all, she's a woman, and said to be young and goodlooking '); and the touch of funk well known to soldiers,

had all been left behind, on the landing, outside the door. On that door was an empty card-frame, which before the war had contained a visiting card with the name : ' Major Witold Krynski '. (Now there should be a card with the name ' Maria Krynska ', but there wasn't . . . and there wouldn't be.)

He had left his nerves on the stairs ; now he was steeled by his orders, and by the cold hard pressure on his ribs : his pistol, a Walter 7.65, flat, and infallible.

He reached the glass door. He knocked (how absurd !) and entered without waiting for a reply.

The light dazzled him : two large windows (closed, that's excellent !). By the left-hand window a young woman was bent over a small table ; on it was a chessboard with pieces set out. The long, white fingers held a black pawn ; the shapely arm bared of a silk sleeve hung over the board in the stillness of concentration. She did not notice him, she did not even turn her head.

On the right, a closed door. With two long strides he reached and opened it : an empty bedroom, a large double bed, a triple-door wardrobe, a dressing table with mirror, bedside tables.

" Excuse me, you . . . "

He drew back and closed the door. The woman had raised her head, but she did not look surprised : she was still concentrated, only half aware of him. She turned her eyes back to the board, swiftly moved a figure (a pawn, a rook, the king perhaps ?). Then she stared at him, her eyes dilated with astonishment.

" Mrs. Maria Krynska ? "

" What do you want ? " she asked sharply. The black locks of her loosely bound hair trembled with her impatient movement and fell down over her neck behind her angrily tilted head. Below her white forehead her fine, green eyes, fringed with long lashes, gazed at the intruder in a persistent

and almost threatening stare.

"I asked: 'are you Maria Krynska?' " he said. ('This isn't going to be so simple,' the thought flashed through his mind.)

"I am; but what do you want?"

With his left hand he pulled a small folded paper from his pocket; his right gripped the butt of the pistol in his belt, one finger released the safety catch.

He shook the green paper to unfold it and reveal the typewritten words; just as one waves good-bye at the station to somebody going on a long journey. The paper spread out into an official-looking, oblong document.

" 'Judgment of the Special Court of the Republic of Poland', " he began to read in an unnaturally hard tone.

The words dropped like stones into the silence, they sounded foreign, unreal. He had the feeling that it was someone else speaking; he was only the witness, a listener—astonished, but not personally affected—present at some drama outside him.

" ' . . . Maria Yvonne Krynska, guilty of the crime of collaborating with the occupying power to the detriment of the Polish people . . . death by shooting ' "

She did not look at him. She saw nothing. Or rather, out of space—out of the mirror opposite her perhaps?—a black patch came towards her: smudgy, shapeless, yet not entirely unrecognizable. She groped with one hand for the paper.

"Here it is, you can check it for yourself."

The piece of paper fluttered on to the chessmen. He took it and spread it out roughly, disturbing the unfinished game. He ran his gaze over the bottom line, which he had not read aloud: 'Warsaw, March 15, 1913'; and the remark beneath: 'To the disposition of the execution squad'.

The woman glanced at the text. Then she turned her eyes to him: they were humid, strange, and even more

beautiful.

“ Well ?”

He did not understand ; he stared at her in astonishment.

“ Well . . . go on . . . why don't you . . . shoot ?”

She forced out the words in a very husky whisper, putting all her strength of will into uttering them. But her voice expressed not only fear ; it was warm with another tone : gentle and inviting.

“ Why don't you shoot ?” she repeated in a calmer and rather louder voice.

He did not answer. He could not think of any answer, he did not even try to find one. He was gripped by an amazing impotence and an immense sucking vacuum. He had no idea how long this pause continued : for a minute, or two, or only the fraction of a second.

“ Fire, why don't you ?” she cried out. “ After all, it makes no difference now.”

He was still held in his stupid torpor ; he was taken by surprise, he was waiting. But he could not have said what he was waiting for.

“ I know. All the appearances are against me. But it's a mistake ; don't you see ? A ghastly, tragic mistake.” Her voice broke, she seemed about to burst into tears.

He remained silent. But he felt his capacity for action flowing back into him. Only his thoughts crowded helplessly against the iron-hard frame of the vacuum. “ A mistake ? What mistake ? What does she mean by ‘ ghastly mistake ’ ?” A sentence drummed into his head at school leaped to the surface of his memory : “ ‘ Errare humanum est ’ ; which means . . . ” He suppressed the thought. He snatched the pistol from his belt. But he did not fire.

She started from her chair :

“ Well, what are you still waiting for ? I make no defence, you can murder me. But I tell you, I'm innocent.”

The words were firm, almost challenging, and were said

with increasing strength of tone. They did not rise into a cry: they stumbled over some invisible threshold, and died down.

"Yes, it will be murder," she ended almost in a whisper. "My blood will fall on you, on my judges, on you all."

She was pale; her hands, helpless, yet strong, hung limply down her white silk dressing gown. He lowered his gun.

"Is that all you can say in your defence?" he asked.

She remained silent for a long time, her eyes fixed on the floor. They were divided by the silence: a clock measured it out with the even pace of its monotonous tick, tock; tick, tock. A stream of water, from a tap turned on in the next apartment, roared in his ears like a thundering waterfall.

"You . . ." she began, raising her head, "you don't want to believe me. I . . . I . . ." she stammered; "I'm unable to prove anything . . . hardly anything. But do you think a woman like me, the wife of an officer, the wife of a man who fought with the Polish Legions . . .? Look at me. The facts . . . no . . . only the appearances, the shadows of the facts are against me. But they are only shadows . . ." she clutched at the word as though it would save her; "they would vanish at once, if . . . if . . . the light were to come."

"She's crazy" he swore inwardly, "she takes me for an intellectual!" He never could stand phrasemongering. Yet he listened. ("She's a good-looking bitch; Franek wasn't shooting a line.")

"The appearances are against me," she went on more calmly. "Suspicious, circumstantial evidence. And intrigues; don't you see? Intrigues . . . Yes, I know," she added abruptly, "I did go about with that Gestapo-man, with that fat, loathsome pig! But why, what for?"

She was silent once more, only to break into a torrent of hurried, desperate words; as a merchant empties his bag to the last copper in order to ransom his life from the highwayman.

" And yet I have . . . I've got proof . . . I've a witness. He'll tell all, he'll explain . . . You know him . . . " she raised her voice. " He's a Pole, he's your man, your agent." She tried to twist her pale lips into a smile. " A man just as active as you . . . a hero . . . he may even be a colleague of yours . . . "

Marek raised his pistol (he felt almost indifferent now ; ' our people had got her thoroughly taped ').

" His name ?" he asked coldly.

" Zielski."

" You bitch !"

He pressed the trigger. The spring clicked hollowly ; the cap had failed to explode. He repeated the movement impetuously. The dead cartridge flew on to the carpet ; but the next—perhaps he had pressed too violently—jammed in the chamber.

Cursing aloud, he struggled to free it ; it was jammed fast, and would not shift with all his tugging. He felt drops of clammy sweat running down his forehead. The vacuum returned to his entrails, but now it was poisoned with fury.

She dropped back into her chair. She stared at him for a moment as he stood shaking with frenzy ; her face pale, her features set, as though in plaster. Then she rested her elbow on the table and leaned her forehead on her hand ; the fluffy hair fell in soft black waves over the table, concealing her face. She sat motionless, helpless ; completely absent, seemingly not of this world.

The silence returned to the room ; now he found it derisive and hateful. And only now did he notice that the air was heavy, filled with pungent feminine scent. He had difficulty in breathing. His brain ached with his whirling thoughts, each more stupid than the last.

What on earth was he to do ? He looked about the room for some instrument with which to pick out the damned cartridge : a knife, a nailfile, scissors. Nothing, absolutely

nothing. Here everything was tidy and gentle, no pointed objects were to be seen. The room was deadly boring, typically feminine.

He could tie her up, and put his weapon in order at leisure ; there must be something he could use, in the bedroom or the kitchen. Of course, in the kitchen. But what could he tie her up with ? And he'd have to stop her mouth, she was sure to start screaming.

He flung the useless pistol furiously on the floor and looked at her : there was something wrong with her. Her head had dropped to the table, several chessmen were scattered on the carpet, the board was hidden beneath the dark flood of her hair. Her right hand was dangling helplessly, the chalk-white fingers almost touched the floor ; her left arm was covered by her hair, only the bare elbow stuck out beyond the edge of the table ; her right leg was weirdly bent backward from the knee ; the body was perfectly still.

He stooped and snatched up one hand ; it was dead and cold. The absurd thought : " perhaps I've killed her after all," flashed through his head and died away ; obviously she'd fainted.

Now his reactions were instinctive, sure and swift, guided by past upbringing, confirmed by masculine instinct. As he carried her to the bedroom she seemed as light as a child ; but when he laid the inert body on the bed he suddenly saw her as a woman. He lingered, in no hurry to do more : a faint isn't fatal. If necessary he could pour water over her, or perhaps he could find some vinegar, or spirit. He bent over her. The flimsy dressing gown had slipped aside, revealing long, beautiful legs. Higher still, the gown was not very discreet. Her pale face and parted lips, shapely and full, only a moment ago still rich with natural colour, seemed very beautiful, and very womanly in her helplessness.

He straightened up to survey the room ; he could not see any Eau de Cologne. As he crossed the sitting room to go to

the kitchen he knocked his foot against his gun. He kicked it furiously ; it flew across the carpet and the polished floor, and bounced off the wall with a crash. The jammed cartridge sprang out of the chamber, spun on the slippery parquet, and came to rest.

His pistol was once more ready for service.

2

THE ' Under the Snout ' dining-room was almost empty. This may have been due to the time of day (it was late afternoon); or possibly the regular morning round-ups in that part of the city had caused the district to be more deserted than usual.

The dining-room was in the main Marszalkowska Street, not far from St. Saviour's Square ; and, as the fascia-board proclaimed, its official name was ' M. Jablonski, Butcher '. But its regular customers always called it ' Under the Snout '. The name was said to have been given it by a lawyer who, in pre-war days, had been in the habit of dining there, and arranging his love affairs with his intimate lady friends over hurried suppers. Probably it had been suggested by the stuffed boar's head which hung above the entrance to the main dining-room, consisting of two small rooms littered with bare deal tables. They were not entered directly from the street, but were reached through a shop and slaughter-house famous for first-class produce. A further room, at the end of a long narrow corridor, and looking out on to a typical, very dark and small Warsaw courtyard, was usually reserved for very select customers.

It will be seen that ' Under the Snout ' did not provide

even luxury or comfort ; it was not to be compared with the far more fashionable bars of Marszalkowska Street and the neighbourhood. But it had many esoteric virtues known only to initiates. Before the war it had been noted for very good yet quite cheap hams, pork chops, and roasted sucking pigs, while even in the worst days of the German occupation the not too clean waiter could always supply regular customers with portions of potatoes and cabbage, beneath which large, succulent chops were buried. Mr. Jablonski could pull strings, and did not object to the black market.

That afternoon, one of Marek's colleagues in the Execution Squad, a youngster named Brutus, was tackling a pork cutlet in the almost empty back room. His fair hair shook over his plate like a bunch of straw in the wind, and his crimson cheeks inflated and deflated rapidly as he hurriedly devoured the illegally provided meat. Sitting opposite him was a man aged about forty, with a pale, energetic, but very tired-looking face. He was drinking tea, and that rather disturbed Brutus, for hardly anyone drank tea at ' Under the Snout ', while Gabriel scorned anything weaker than 60% proof spirit. This departure from principles surely indicated that something serious had happened, and a storm was in the offing.

Brutus polished off his cutlet, put down his knife and fork, and gazed expectantly at his superior officer. Gabriel glanced at his wrist-watch.

" Five-thirty," he remarked " Contact was arranged for five-fifteen. In case Korda doesn't arrive, I'll begin with you. What's the report on Krynska ?"

Brutus fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

" I was late at the rendezvous because of a round-up, so I couldn't make it."

" Is that so ? Where was the round-up ?"

" In the Avenues, by the park. "

" You could have taken backstreets and gone through the

gardens." Gabriel stared hard at the lad ; the weariness had left his eyes.

" I tried it, but it took too long. And in the gardens some hefty joker was looking for trouble, and of course I couldn't use my gun. That made me half an hour late."

" Then why didn't you go straight to her apartment ?"

" Franek hadn't told me the address."

" All right, we'll see. It may have been his fault."

He took a novel out of his raincoat pocket, turned to a certain page and bent the top corner down. Brutus watched him with curiosity, almost superstitiously : he had heard of Gabriel's extraordinary system of mnemonics, which enabled him to remember innumerable details and keep track of all his multifarious activities : he was the commander of one of the five Special Action detachments operating in Warsaw. He never made a written note, but always carried about a Polish or German novel, its pages stained and dog-eared. The stains and turned down corners were infallible : he never made a mistake over names or addresses, he was never late for an appointment, and he kept perfect control over his own and his subordinates' operations.

" What else have you to report ?" he asked as he put the book away. Brutus noticed its title : Conrad's Lord Jim.

" Nothing else, sir. I tried to catch Marek at three at the centre, but he wasn't there. I called again at four, but the place was closed."

" Well, well ; very strange !" Gabriel said thoughtfully, gazing into space. His weary face betrayed no great interest in the report ; during this one month alone his squad had carried out nineteen death sentences.

" By the way, d'you happen to have any gaspers ?" he asked in a different tone, as though manoeuvring to more intimate terms. Brutus sweated with pleasure : apparently the inquest was ended, at least, so far as he was concerned.

" Yes, of course," he said eagerly, turning out his pocket.

He produced a dirty handkerchief, a pack of cards, a medallion of the Madonna (from faith or habit, he always carried it). Several revolver cartridges scattered out of a yellow rag on to the table ; he covered them hastily with the handkerchief, glancing at Gabriel. Thank goodness he was lost in thought, and hadn't noticed his subordinate's carelessness. At last he found the ' gaspers ' : with a smile of triumph he fished out a box of home-made cigarettes. He himself did not smoke, but he always kept some for occasions like this.

" Here you are, sir. I've some Egyptians too, somewhere."

" These'll do. May I take a few ?"

Without waiting for permission he took a handful of cigarettes and put them in his breast pocket. Meanwhile Brutus had brought out the Egyptians :

" You'll find these are better, sir."

" I don't mind, chum. I don't mind."

The procedure was repeated with almost ceremonial precision. Brutus was holding the lighted match for Gabriel when the door creaked, and Marek entered. At that moment the only other customer in the room, a well-fed profiteer by the look of him, rose from his table and went out. The three Special Action men were left alone.

Gabriel took a deep draw, sent the smoke upward in a fine stream, and asked, eyeing Marek closely :

" Well ?"

Marek did not answer. He looked interrogatively at Brutus, who in turn glanced at Gabriel uncertainly.

" Brutus was too late for the job because of a round-up," Gabriel said. " What have you to report ?"

" Everything's okay," Marek said, as he brought a chair from another table. He did not look at Gabriel.

" Identity card ?"

" She hadn't any papers on her. I couldn't search the place as I had no one to cover me. But I brought this bit of

rag away." He took a patterned silk handkerchief from his pocket and laid it on the table. The strong scent of perfume streamed from it in an invisible fountain.

"Did she suffer much?" Brutus asked, reaching for the handkerchief.

"Don't ask stupid questions," Gabriel snapped. "And keep your paws off; don't touch the evidence."

He picked up the handkerchief, unfolded it, and examined it indifferently, as though it were a commercial sample sent to him for analysis. In one corner he found a monogram: M and K interwoven in silk thread.

"Okay," he said. "Hand in your statement to Franek tomorrow; he can add it to the report. Give the exact time and circumstances in which the sentence was executed, as usual. He can attach this evidence too." He gave Marek the handkerchief.

The waiter entered to take Marek's order. "Three expresses," Gabriel told him.

Now it was Marek who breathed more easily: the ritual was approaching its end. The waiter set three glasses of almost neat vodka on the table. They would be followed by three further, official rounds; his head would be pleasantly fuddled, and he would be able to sleep . . . sleep.

They drank, rolling the spirit around their tongues. After the second glass Gabriel turned unexpectedly to Marek.

"Oh, I almost forgot: you've been placed at Roza's disposition. You're to report to Philip the day after tomorrow. Olga will put you in contact; I'll send her along to you at ten in the morning. Remember, not tomorrow, the day after."

Marek listened with gaping mouth, his glass of vodka in mid-air. He recovered at last, and threw the spirit back in one gulp: he was drinking delight, liberation. No more executions for him, no more faces distorted with wretched terror, no more eyes starting out of their heads or lips turning blue around white foam. And no mistakes . . .

Gabriel was the first to leave. When he was well away, Marek said good-bye to Brutus (who was envious of his colleague's new assignment, though only a month before he himself had pulled strings hard to get assigned to an execution squad), and with a light heart he went out into the street.

3

THE CROWDS hurrying past the shop made him realize that the curfew hour was approaching. Fortunately, it was not far to the hide-out he had been using for the past week. He went downhill towards the river, along a street which was almost deserted by comparison with the seething life of the main road. He was feeling very tired and sleepy. It was not his eyes, but an instinctive vigilance that suddenly warned him of danger : there was something wrong ahead.

He slowed up and gazed down the dark ravine of the narrow street. At the bottom he saw the dimmed, glimmering lights of a prison van ; beside it was the black shape of a German limousine. He took cover behind a broken wall, peered round it, and mentally counted the houses between him and the Gestapo patrol : no doubt about it, they were halted outside his house. In the faint light of a side lamp he perceived the outline of a beefy S.S. man with an automatic across his shoulder. Another, also in uniform, was talking to a civilian in a cap and a dark leather coat. The driver of the prison van slammed its back doors.

There was no point in hanging around. He turned and went swiftly up the hill. He caught up with some belated pedestrian, passed him, and began to overtake another. He did not run : that would have aroused suspicion. He walked

with the long, hurried stride of the man who has sat too late with friends and is making up for lost time. He was not followed.

When he came to the main Krakowskie Street he slowed down and took a deep breath. He glanced at his watch: damn it, quarter to nine already. He decided to take the tram to Brutus' place, some ten minutes' journey. When he reached the tram stop only thirteen minutes were left.

No tram came along; a well-dressed man waved to a pedal-cyclist drawing a rickshaw, and rode off; the street was almost deserted now. Marek lit a cigarette, and took glance after glance at the luminous dial of his watch: ten minutes to nine. Another rickshaw came along: it was already engaged, by some embracing couple . . . Eight minutes to nine . . . Not a sign of his tram, or any other tram, for that matter. Seven minutes to nine . . . A bulky shadow sped out of a side turning.

"Rickshaw!" Korda shouted. ♡

"Sorry, engaged!" he caught the faint answer of the pedalling driver. He flung away his unfinished cigarette furiously, thrust his hand under his coat, and adjusted his gun: 'Well, if there's nothing else for it!'

It was five to nine when he decided to wait no longer and strode off along Krakowskie Street towards its continuation: Nowy Swiat. He heard a German patrol approaching from one of the side-turnings; he caught the steady tramp of their boots echoing in the emptiness.

He tried gate after gate in Nowy Swiat, but every one was locked. He walked on and on, passing one turning after another, until at last he noticed a gleam of light shining through the slightly open gate of a large block of flats. He reached it in a few strides and was half-way up the stairs before the dilatory porter could turn his key in the gate lock.

The first-floor landing. On the left, a white enamel plate: 'Commercial merchant'. Hell! On the right a brass plate: 'M. Salinski'. Fine! With a name like that they wouldn't

be local Germans at any rate. He rang the bell ; his hand rested automatically on his pistol butt. The door was opened almost at once, by a young, fairhaired girl with smiling lips and blue eyes.

" Excuse me," he touched his hat, " for ringing so late. . . . It's curfew hour . . . and besides . . . " he had a sudden idea and took a chance : " I expect you've been notified."

" Why, of course ; come in, but be quick ! Across to that other door."

As he passed through the spacious hall he turned cold : the coat-rack was hung with coats, and through closed double doors his ears caught the muffled hum of many voices. They did not sound Polish.

" Here, on the right !" The girl opened a door and gently pushed him through. " Quick !" She tugged at his sleeve. He found himself in a bedroom, obviously hers. She at once locked the door behind him.

" What's the matter with you ? You tortoise ! D'you want to get me into trouble ?" The corners of her small, full lips quivered with annoyance.

He stared at her, bewildered. " I'm desperately tired," he said at last.

" Anyone can see that," she smiled again. " But why did you leave it till the last moment ? I asked Wladyslaw . . . Ah, well !" She shrugged her shoulders. " You're perfectly impossible, everyone of you. Good job there was nobody in the hall . . . "

He vaguely realized that she took him for somebody else, but he somehow felt perfect confidence in her.

" I'm sorry to give you so much trouble," he said, for the sake of saying something.

" All right, I don't mind ! You can sleep there." She pointed to a broad divan made up as a bed. " I'll get you a pillow ; I expect you'd like one."

He slowly took off his overcoat.

" And there's a washbasin in that corner. You'll find water in the jug underneath . . . cold, of course. I take it you won't bother to shave now."

" Thank you very much. You're very kind. I'd just like . . ."

" No time for gossiping now. I've been away too long already ; they'll be wondering what's happened to me."

The crowded coat-rack, the murmur of voices, and the strange, elusive scent (cigarettes, surely ? But too good to be Polish) troubled him for a moment, then his anxiety was overwhelmed by his weariness and his confidence in this girl

" You mustn't mind ; I shall have to lock you in."

" Why ?" he asked suspiciously.

" You'll be safer then, believe me. Good night." She held out her hand.

" Good night. But just one other thing," as he held her hand in his strong grip. " What's your name ?"

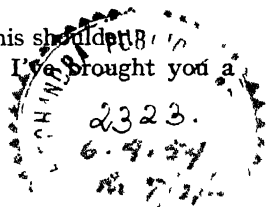
" Krystyna. I may as well tell you so much, as you've got my surname already, I expect. Krystyna Salinska." She pulled her hand away and took hold of the door handle. " And please don't make too much mess : this is my room. Good night."

He removed his jacket and dragged off his leg-boots. Then he put out the light and dropped on to the divan without undressing further. With a last effort of will, or maybe only out of habit, he thrust his pistol between the divan frame and the mattress.

4

HE WAS disturbed by a vigorous tug on his shoulder.

" Are you hibernating ? Get up ! I've brought you a



glass of tea. Would you like to know the time !” Krystyna asked him saucily, as he rubbed his sleepy eyes. It’s five past four ; and we’ve got to be at Basia’s by half-past five.”

“ What Basia ?” he sat up suddenly on the divan.

“ Have you fallen off a Christmas tree ? Didn’t they tell you ? You’ve got to go with me to collect money at Basia’s pub for the prisoners’ fund.” A sudden doubt showed in her eyes. “ You are Antoni, aren’t you ?”

“ No of course not ; I’m Marek Korda ”; he kicked himself at his indiscretion. “ I dropped in here by chance.”

“ What ?” Now it was her turn to be astonished. But she quickly recovered. “ Marek Korda . . . ” she said slowly. “ I believe I’ve heard the boys mention you.” She stood thinking for a moment. “ Well, you’ll have to come with me , I must do the job today. You’ve only got to act as my escort. Have you got a gun, or anything ?”

“ Of course !” he admitted rather reluctantly. “ And I’m quite prepared to go along to the joint with you, provided we have something to eat and drink there.”

When they entered the pub Marek felt uneasy. “ Keep your eyes skinned !” he advised himself. Yet when he looked about the long, narrow, badly lighted bar it seemed quite ordinary : just a common, low-class pub. A buffet of hors d’œuvres ran along the left-hand side from the front window to the back wall , above “ were rows of bottles on shelves. To the right were two small tables ; one was vacant ; at the other two customers were sitting silent, looking as grey and thick as badly brewed beer. There were two more, with pale, furrowed faces, standing at the bar, talking to each other in secretive, snarling whispers, their heads almost together, their lips twisted in artificial grins.

Marek could see only these four, yet he had the feeling that there were many more somewhere around. A hum of voices, almost inaudible, yet very definite, hung in the stale air. “ Through there,” he thought, as he noticed a small

door, half hidden by a coat-stand, in the opposite wall. "There's the heart of this dive."

They hung about for some time, only a few paces from the whispering couple. Marek felt that they were anything but wanted. He had not heard a sound, yet suddenly he felt someone's keen gaze fixed on him. He turned: a man, evidently the landlord, was standing at the door at the far end of the buffet. His cunning face was lit up by a pair of knowing eyes.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked Krystyna as he came up. He paid no attention to Marek: he seemed to be looking right through him. Korda recalled the advice his companion had given him in the tram. "Good evening, boss," he said cheerfully. "And how is little Basia today?"

The landlord replied to the password with a swift glance, now condescending to notice Marek, and even smiling at him.

"Thank you, she's doing fine!" he said almost affably, looking at Krystyna interrogatively.

"He's with me," she said. You know me: I've come for the contributions. Here's the receipt for the month." She handed him a receipt for fifty thousand zlotys, paid to the Polish prisoners' aid fund recognized by the German authorities.

"Oh, yes. Come into the other room." The landlord stood aside for them to pass through the door. "I'll bring the money in a moment."

Krystyna had told Marek of the ritual governing the entry into the main room of the pub. 'At Basia's' was a favourite haunt of the 'wide boys,' the Warsaw gangsters, and as it was not far from the headquarters of the Commissariat of Criminal Police, generally known as 'Cripo,' it was also frequented by the Cripo agents, who added unofficially to their income by working in with the gangsters. At the end of the previous year the elderly landlord's wife had unexpectedly given birth to a daughter, and in his delight he had renamed his establish-

ment after the child. His regular customers thought it a matter of honour and a proof of their refinement always to ask after the infant's health, and it became a rule that only those who observed this formality could be admitted to the second, inner room.

The worn stairs creaked a little underfoot. Korda opened a glass-panelled door. At first he thought all the tables were occupied : there were only eight altogether, three large and five small. But when his eyes grew accustomed to the clouds of smoke he noticed a small vacant table by the window. They went to it.

From one corner came the strains of a Czech popular song which the Germans had adopted : "Rosamunde, schenk mir dein Lacheln einst." A violinist and pianist were providing an 'artistic' garnish to the not very elaborate menu, and their music was borne along on an unending flow of alcohol. The violinist's characteristic figure impressed Marek, and he associated him with the pub ever after. The man was tall ; and a loose, badly creased black suit, perhaps the memory of a dinner jacket, or the upper part of an undertaker's frock coat, hung from his thin, angular shoulders. His very pale face, bisected by an aquiline nose, was a death-mask in which only the feverishly glittering eyes were alive—bold eyes, yet kindly ; demonic, yet human.

Without waiting for their order, a stout, black-haired waitress brought Korda and his companion a bottle of government-monopoly vodka. They asked for two portions of sausage. Marek looked about him. At the next table were three young men with faces which looked as though all individuality had been chemically eliminated from them. They were silently drinking beer.

"Crip-o !" Krystyna explained, quite unnecessarily : they were classic specimens of criminal agents, stamped out in series from a few stereotyped moulds, and applicable in all lands beyond the aegis of the League of Nations. It was not

their profession that aroused Marek's distrust, but their presence and activities in such a place.

"They're not dangerous," she added. She was obviously trying to impress him; she interlarded her remarks with 'professional' terminology that came strangely from her. "They come here for a binge and to do a little business on the side. Oil them enough and they'll get gunmen out of clink, and they don't mind joining in with the gangsters, for a price."

Korda examined the other tables. On the whole the customers were decently dressed, some of them almost fashionably, in the characteristic flashy attire of the newly rich. Spirits were being swallowed down in wholesale quantities; at a further table someone was hiccuping drunkenly, another laughing noisily. Close to the musicians two crimson faces were slobbering in a brotherly kiss.

The duet ended its strumming. The waitress brought the sausage. Marek filled their glasses again. Directly opposite them two tables were set together, seven men of various ages were sitting round them. They seemed already to be well canned, though the fun hadn't started yet: they were still 'on the job.' In front of them several empty quart bottles barred off piles of five-hundred zloty notes. A stocky, fair-haired youngster with a low forehead, prominent cheekbones and a snub nose, was manipulating the notes, talking all the time in a subdued voice. When he raised his head Korda guessed that he was the chief: he had determined eyes.

"Smuggling?" Marek asked Krystyna.

"Good lord, no!" she laughed. "That isn't allowed here. They're sharing out after a 'job'."

"Would you like me to play something for you?" The violinist's black figure suddenly hovered over them: feminine visitors were rare in this pub. Marek took out a hundred-zloty note, and gave Krystyna an encouraging look.

"What music do you like?"

She hesitated : " ' Chrysanthemum ' . . . or . . . "

" ' Chrysanthemum ' , " he told the violinist, as he gave him the note. The gaunt figure floated back to the daïs and whispered to his companion.

Meanwhile the group of gangsters had finished ' work '. Their chief straightened up, stretched himself with satisfaction, looked around his gang, then called across the room :

" Mr. Antos, play us : ' Stan was a Cripple ' . "

" After the next item, " the violinist calmly replied.

" We'll have it now. "

" I'm very sorry, but I've been asked for ' Chrysanthemum ' . "

" To hell with ' Chrysanthemum ' ! You do the one about Stan the Polish soldier. I pay, you play ; " he threw a wad of notes across the room to the daïs. " I'll hire you for the whole evening. "

" Delighted, I'm sure ; and thank you, Mr. Victor. But I must play the piece the lady and gentleman ordered ; they were first. " The violinist's voice remained calm and amiable.

Seven pairs of eyes were turned on Marek and Krystyna. At the other tables the conversation died away. After the hubbub the silence seemed ominous, almost ghostly. It was broken by the gangster :

" While I'm here I'm first ! Play up ! "

" . . . Chrysanthemum ! " Korda calmly added.

Krystyna was obviously frightened. She tugged at his sleeve and opened her mouth to whisper something, but could not get the words out.

The gangster leader rose slowly from his chair. Two of his gang shifted with hurried respect to let him pass. He walked across to Marek and Krystyna's table. The landlord's face appeared at the door. The waitress squealed quietly. The gangster's hard features wore a benevolent smile. But when he was a few paces away the smile suddenly vanished and his eyes flashed imperatively :

"Piss off, you bastard! Get out while the going's good!"

Marek jumped up, pale, but calm. His right hand rested on the pistol butt under his coat.

"Take it easy," he said through his teeth. "This pub is open to everybody. And the band too. They'll play 'Chrysanthemum'."

The gangster went crimson with anger. They stood glaring at each other. All the room held its breath. Azure cigarette smoke floated gently under the ceiling; the cigarettes remained poised in mid-air.

Victor took another step forward.

"Stand back!" Marek shouted. "Keep your hands off!" He snatched out his gun and pointed it at Victor's chest.

The gangster's features registered amazement. Not anger, nor fear: simply amazement. Someone pointing a gun at him! The blood flowed slowly away from his domineering face, his eyelids began to blink as though he were dazzled by sudden light. The silence in the room was heavy. At last his face smoothed out and returned almost to normal: evidently an idea had penetrated his obstinate brain. "Ah, that's different!" he said with a smile. "So you're one of us. You're not trying to pull a fast one!"

Marek did not lower his weapon, nor shift his gaze. A man at another table, a gigantic fellow with long arms and a pockmarked face, rose and came across to them. He had a stubbly chin, but his hair was very neatly combed and brushed. At some time or other his left ear had been torn, and it hung in a freakish white strip. His gimlet eyes shifted anxiously from Marek to the gangster.

"Don't start a shemozzle, Victor," he said good-naturedly, laying his great paw on the other man's shoulder. "You can see he's like us. I expect he's one of the 'Executive'." He turned to Marek: "And you can put that rod away. We're all Poles here."

Marek lowered his gun, and Victor smiled all over his face :

" The Ape's dead right. I was only kidding."

" That sort of joke," the ' Ape ' interrupted him, " might land us all in trouble. The ' Huns ' are down on us, and one of the Cripo's already hopped off to fetch them. Stinky !" he turned to a fair-haired youngster at his own table. " Go after him and tell them at the Commissariat everything's okay. And you," he added, tuning to Marek, " put that rod in your pocket and join us with your worthy young lady. Come and have a vodka."

Victor held out his hand to Marek. " Mr. Antos, make it ' Chrysanthemum '," he called to the violinist. The musicians struck up as though out to race each other. A hum of relief buzzed through the room like a swarm of bees. 'Ape' smiled happily, baring his teeth.

" Vodka for the whole house !" Victor bawled at the waitress. " And Martell for the young lady," he corrected himself, " French Martell, three star."

Marek looked at Krystyna. The fearful look had gone from her face, it was flushed again. She nodded.

Victor awkwardly bowed to her, and with a broad, affable gesture invited them to his table. When the first, ' official ' glass had been poured out, the ' Ape ', obviously proud of his role as conciliator, started a discussion on politics.

" It's like this," he said to Marek ; " we do our stuff, but only against the Germans, you know ; only against the Germans. We're working for an independent Poland, like you."

" Only, not the one that was !" one of Victor's group remarked quietly, glancing sidelong in case his chief wanted to close his mouth for him.

" Not like in 1919, ' with a government solid, strong, ready ', with featherbeds and lovers waiting for her in case she wants to run away again," Victor laughed.

They raised their glasses and drank, each to the future country of his dreams.

5

THEY HEARD the wail of the German patrol siren just before they reached the corner. Marek glanced at his watch : it was six-thirty.

They stopped for a moment. Vnuk set his heavy suitcase down on the sidewalk. Mopsa, who was keeping pace with them on the other side of the street, stopped too.

The siren wailed monotonously . it did not swell nor did it tail off into a low, quivering grumble.

" They've pulled up somewhere not far from here," Marek said to Vnuk. " Wait a moment."

He slipped along to the corner and took a swift glance down the turning ; it was empty, except for one or two older men and women who were fearfully sheltering in gateways. " It's a round-up," Marek decided. He beckoned to the others. When they joined him, all three set off along the side street in the direction of the siren, keeping close to the walls.

" Where's the round-up ?" Marek asked a grey-haired, respectable-looking man who was anxiously peering out of a gateway. Possibly he noticed the automatic hanging under Korda's raincoat, for his eyes shifted nervously in his pimply face.

" Someone said it's in the next street," he said quietly. " But I haven't seen anything around here. You can get down to the Vistula by taking Topiel or Tamka Street."

The siren died away for a moment. Then it began again in a high-pitched, triumphant howl, like a horde of demons carrying off a lost soul. Without stopping to question the man further, Marek led his patrol at a run towards the sound. At first glance they might have been taken for three civilians who had lost their heads and were fleeing in the wrong direction.

"Look out ! There's a round-up down there." A boy ran out of a gate and pointed towards the river. Then his inquisitive blue eyes rested on Marek's long leg-boots, stared at Vnuk's fibre suit-case, and shifted to the lanky Mopsa, who was following some fifteen paces behind them. He said no more.

Korda, a pace or two in front, suddenly turned and ran across to the other side of the street, making for the ruins of a single-storey house. Vnuk and Mopsa hurried after him. Behind the broken wall they were hidden from the street for a good ten yards. In the middle of the site a pile of rubble rose half a storey high.

"Mopsa ! You cover me at that end !" Korda pointed to the right-hand end of the wall. "Vnuk cover me on the left. I'll be back in a moment."

Stumbling over projecting beams and loose, broken brick, he climbed to the top of the pile of rubble. Turning to face the river, he at once caught sight of the German patrol car which was terrorizing the Vistula district. It was stationed on the road spiralling down from the Poniatowski Bridge to the Kosciuszko Embankment. But it was not alone. Immediately behind it were two lorries, one of them packed with prisoners. He could see them as a solid black mass gently swaying with the movement of the crowded bodies. The second lorry was drawn up just behind. The Germans were collecting the last few victims to fill it : three German soldiers, looking from this distance as though roughly cut out of cardboard, were driving a handful of dark civilian figures down from the bridge. The German detachment was completed by three motor-cycles with side-cars, patrolling the road.

The siren died away ; now the round-up seemed like a play of silent, distant shadows, a scene from a marionette theatre : not alarming ; indeed, almost amusing.

"Trrr . . . trrr . . . trrr !" A light machine-gun stuttered in short bursts. Carried by the wind, the sound reached

Marek's ears with extraordinary clarity. A dark, running form crumpled in the roadway ; he was lucky ; he would not be journeying to the Pawiak prison.

As he stood watching the scene, the patrol leader drew up a plan of operations. It was rather mad, for the German patrol would normally consist of thirty-two gendarmes, armed with ten submachine-guns, and hand-grenades, while a heavy machine-gun was posted in front of their patrol lorry. Each of the side-cars carried a gendarme with a light machine-gun. And the plan was really a little outside regulations, for Special Action patrols, though employed to harass the German authorities, were not supposed to interfere with round-ups. But Marek had made up his mind. He noted that on the other side of the street was a row of undamaged, several-storey houses, then ran down to join the others.

"It's a round-up all right," he said briefly. "On the Embankment. If they come this way they'll be here in a minute or two. Vnuk, you go over to the house opposite, one of the windows on the first floor. Take careful aim at the patrol car : the prisoners' lorries will be right behind it. Mopsa and I will cover you from here. Mopsa, let the leading motor-cycle pass for me to deal with."

Vnuk picked up his suitcase and hurried across to the opposite gateway. Mopsa went to take up his position farther along the wall. He released the safety catch of his automatic pistol and laid out his six grenades conveniently to hand. As Marek was looking for the best vantage-point at his end of the wall the siren rose to a scream, and died away. He scrambled back to the top of the rubble, the Germans were on the move. A procession was slowly making its way down the road from the bridge ; it was headed by a motor-cycle and side car, then came the patrol car followed by the two lorries crammed with prisoners, while two motor-cycles and side-cars brought up the rear.

Holding his breath, he watched their progress : would they

go straight along the Embankment, or would they turn up the side street towards the ambush ?

They had turned ! He ran down to his post. He rested the barrel of his Schmeisser automatic on the broken wall ; the barrel stared down the quiet, empty street. The siren's wail grew steadily louder.

" They're coming this way ! " Mopsa outshouted it, as he caught sight of the motor-cycle coming round a bend in the street ; Korda peered over the wall just as the broad bonnet of the patrol car swung round behind the motor-cycle. Kneeling down, he adjusted his automatic until the helmets of the gendarmes sitting in the driver's cabin came within his gunsights. Then he shifted the barrel slightly to the left, to take aim at the leading motor-cycle. The Germans were travelling slowly, almost at a funeral pace. The siren shook the air with its wail, died down, then started up again. \

Energy was gathering in Marek like a river constrained within a weir bed, rising higher higher : in a moment it would find vent in a race of activity. He kept the German motor-cyclist in his sight as he came slowly along ; the thin vertical line bisected the man's crimson face. Now he could see him even more clearly : he had turned his head to say something to the gendarme at the machine-gun in the side-car. They were coming straight towards his barrel ; the driver's face bounced up and down over the uneven setts of the roadway, slipping out of the sight, then coming into it again. As he advanced, a steady hand shifted the barrel covering him.

Now it was only a matter of seconds ; the motor-cycle had passed Mopsa and was almost level with Korda. The patrol car was immediately behind it ; fortunately, the lorries of prisoners had fallen back a good twenty yards. The siren wailed again on a low note.

Korda took one rapid glance to make sure Vnuk was ready ; he caught a glimpse of him lurking in a window opposite. As he looked, he saw one long arm raised : next moment a

bunch of grenades came hurtling down towards the patrol car.

Later, in silence and solitude Marek had many an opportunity to review this operation against the German patrol ; the details came back to him clearly, in very slow motion and sharp definition, fixed for ever in his memory.

The siren suddenly stopped wailing, broken by a succession of explosions which faded into groans, into a sharp, terrible cry of pain, savage, yet human. The blast forced Marek to the ground. When he raised his head and took the motor-cycle in his sight, he saw that it had been flung athwart the street, its front wheel against the edge of the sidewalk.

Two short bursts from his Schmeisser ; the driver let go of the handle-bars, raised his heavy body abruptly as though trying to look up, then fell back ; his helmet crashed against the roadway ; his right foot caught in the side-car frame.

A third burst disposed of the gendarme at the machine-gun ; he flung out his arms and fell over the front of the side-car.

Now a charge of dynamite arrived. Marek first noticed it in Vnuk's solicitous hands at the window. His movements were swift, but expert : he cast the can for it to fall as close as possible to the patrol-car's engine, into the very heart of the German groans and curses.

The end of the world—at least of this world—for thirty henchmen of a demented Fuhrer. A roar ; billows of black smoke ; crimson sheets of fire from the flaming engine ; flying human bodies ; hands, legs, strips of uniform ; pieces of sheet metal ; a chaos of destruction, a pyrotechnic display of death. And then, silence. A large helmet hung on the edge of the wall close to Korda, then rolled into the ruin with a hollow clatter : a miniature fragment of the main burst of thunder.

Marek surveyed the scene for a moment, then ran to Mopsa. " No grenades ! They've had enough !" he stopped

him from hurling a grenade at the flaming car. "Keep a lookout for Vnuk! He'll be breaking across in a minute." From Mopsa's point he got a better view of the devastation. The Germans were in utter confusion. The first lorry of prisoners had been swung round by the second explosion; now it blocked the road. The prisoners were jumping out; the stunned German escort made no attempt to stop them. The gendarme beside the driver raised his rifle to his shoulder, but was not allowed to fire: a Polish civilian in a leather jacket knocked up the barrel and tore it from his hand.

Korda and Mopsa made their way along the top of the narrow wall: two tall, dark, almost grotesque figures in mackintoshes reaching halfway down their calves. Now the driver of the first lorry was just below them. As he stared up through the windscreen Marek saw his face, pale and sweating, his eyes darting under the peak of his helmet, vainly seeking safety. His fellow was groping down on the floor of the cabin. Mopsa raised his hand to throw a grenade, but dropped it again: a bunch of Polish civilians scurried past the bonnet.

Marek raised his automatic, and waited for the gendarme to straighten up. A sharp, whistling burst: the crash of shattered glass, slivers flying in all directions. The driver bent double, clutching at his chest; his head fell on the steering wheel with a sluggish, almost drowsy movement. The other gendarme lifted his hand to his face, but before he could reach it his head slumped over and hung down through the cabin side-window.

A brief exchange of pistol shots came from the direction of the patrol-car. Marek glanced that way: Vnuk was withdrawing from his post; he finished off some wounded zealot who tried to bar his way. His lanky figure flickered through the smoke as he dashed across the road, to rejoin the others.

Their task was not yet completed. A short burst of fire came from the end of the German procession. The two motor-cyclists at the rear had drawn up level with the second

lorry of prisoners, some twenty yards behind the first. One fired his machine-gun at the prisoners, but was unable to do much for fear of hitting his own comrades. Nor could Korda fire at him, for civilians were milling about between him and the German.

"This way ! Into the ruins !" he shouted at the top of his voice, pointing with his free hand to the breach in the wall. As they pressed through the narrow gap and fled over the rubble to the safety of the next street, he called down to them :

"I want three volunteers !"

The call was not unheeded. Five men broke away from the mass.

"Only three ! The man in the bowler, not you ! And not you sir ; nor the elderly gentleman !" he selected his men.

A hatless youngster wearing a semi-military jacket, a workman in a blue blouse buttoned up to his neck, and a spectacled man, obviously of the professional class, hurried up to him and stood awaiting his orders.

"Mopsa and Vnuk ! Take the civilians and collect all the arms and ammunition you can. Come back at once. And no heroics ! I'll cover you from here."

They ran to execute the order. No one fired as they collected the six rifles of the escort to the first car and laid them down behind the wall beside Marek. The motor-cyclists had momentarily lost their initiative. But as the street swiftly emptied their machine-guns began to rattle again. Marek changed his clip and strained his gaze in search of a target.

Now single bullets began to whistle past his ears : the gendarmes of the second lorry of prisoners had recovered from their surprise and had caught sight of him. He jumped down behind the wall ; from the street only his head and cap were visible : a target too difficult for any but a first-rate shot. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his two men and the three

volunteers flickering through the smoke as they collected weapons. He must hold up the Germans for a minute or two longer.

A burst of fire sent bits of brick and rubble scattering over him, but the aim was too low. It came from the motor-cycle drawn up behind the engine of the second lorry. Now the other machine-gun opened fire round a house corner.

Marek let fly again, not in the hope of hitting anything, but to draw the German fire. He took cover to change his second clip ; the German fire was getting hotter, but it was wasteful, and much too low. The bullets pecked at the wall in front of him. The situation wasn't too bad. The others would be finished any moment now. But he had only two clips left. He glanced to the left : a more daring gendarme had crawled from behind a dead civilian and was about to fire. He drew his head down ; the bullet whistled directly above him, he would have lost his cap. Time he used his hand grenades !

He had six altogether. He threw the first with a broad swing of his arm ; it burst and scattered, the German cried out. He would give no further trouble.

When he raised his head again to fire a couple of rounds at the motor-cycles he realized that his position had one weakness : about ten yards to the right of him was a high palisade ; a determined movement could force it easily. If the Germans approached him from that side they could pick him off without difficulty. He hurled two grenades at the second lorry, where the majority of the German escort had taken cover. The thought of that palisade drilled persistently, almost painfully into his brain. He took another glance that way ; was that the flat top of a helmet rising just above it ? He threw two grenades, intending to drop them just over the palisade. But they went too far : they exploded empty, like boxes collapsing.

He felt a gentle tug at his leg.

"We've finished . . ." the rest of Mopsa's words were lost in a very loud rattle : both the machine-guns were firing from new positions. When they stopped the street was not silent : rifles cracked intermittently.

Korda took a glance over the wall, drawing his head down at once.

"You get away. I'll be withdrawing in one minute."

Mopsa slipped off. Marek watched as his men and the three volunteers, carrying their valuable booty, made their way through the ruins.

An explosion just behind him flung him to the ground. He felt a choking emptiness, he could not get his breath. The last remnants of his consciousness caught the sound of many boots clattering along the roadway.

6

"MESDAMES, messieurs, faites vos jeux !"

The senior croupier's voice bounced off the green baize table under the low hanging lamp ; impersonal, though pleasant, it sounded like a challenge thrown out by the table itself, an enticing whisper from the roulette wheel, an inciting call from its figures and compartments.

The call provoked a rustle of chips pushed across the table. They were staked swiftly and prodigally. Coarse hands, with spade-shaped fingers ; long hands and square hands, crimson, and white, and blue ; delicate, feminine hands with scarlet, oval nails ; masculine hands, knotted, brown, pink, and white ; they all pushed the chips nervously across the table. The hands of merchants, profiteers, demireps and swindlers, aristocrats and boors. And even murderers. Hands

holding grand flacs for five hundred zlotys, flacs for hundreds, and an abundance of louis, each representing twenty zlotys. The four assistant croupiers raked them in dexterously, and arranged them on the chosen numbers.

All the divisions of the long table were covered with stakes : millions were lying on the cloth. Restless, irresolute hands shifted chips from one square to another : from red to black, from *pair* to *impair*, from number to number. Some of the gamblers tried to reinsure themselves, staking *en carré*, or *à cheval*, playing for and against. Several of the jostling crowd had not yet placed their stakes : prejudiced and cautious, they were delaying decision until the last second. Their feverishly glittering eyes were fixed on the croupier's mouth, they intended to throw down their gage to fortune at the very last moment.

The pale-faced croupier, a well-known figure from the pre-war casino at Zoppot, dressed in a dinner jacket, took a last glance round the table with his weary eyes. In a moment it would be too late to stake. He opened his mouth :

“ Rien ne va plus ! ”

By the time he got out the last word several more stakes had been placed on chosen squares. Madame Bergue was too late by the fraction of a second. The croupier's rake pushed her stake away :

“ Excusez madame, ç ne va plus ! ” The large brown eyes of the queen of Warsaw's demireps looked at the senior croupier imploringly, but with no effect.

A practised twist of the wheel with the left hand, a dexterous cast of the ball with the right : the ball was in play. Silence : thirty pairs of eyes watched the whirling ball, thirty breaths were held avariciously. The tiny soul of the hazard sped swiftly, first round the circumference of the spinning wheel, then lower, slowing down as it descended the spiral ; they could hear its bony knocking against the ribs . . . slower . . . slower . . . now they could read the

twinkling figures, could distinguish the colours speeding past . . . the ball trembled in a red compartment . . . it stopped in a black one.

"Numéro quinze . . . noir . . . impair . . . deuxième douzaine . . . deuxième colonne . . ." the croupier announced the winner.

Relaxation, of triumph or disillusionment ; a hum of animated voices ; words in Polish, French and German, entangled and mingled with the smoke of dozens of cigarettes, with the clatter of the chips, the rattle of glasses, of cups. Those sitting at the table hurriedly made notes in their notebooks : it was the tenth time number fifteen had won this evening. A grey-haired lady turned angrily to a fair-haired girl sitting beside her : " I told you to put it on black, but you always have your own way." " Don't make such a fuss, maman," the girl whispered ; " people can hear you."

The croupiers began to pay out ; the rakes twinkled rapidly, gathering in the forfeited stakes, pushing winnings over to the lucky ones. A stout, excited man sitting opposite the senior croupier had a pile of flacs in front of him : he had staked *à cheval*, winning at seventeen to one. His clean-shaven face with its traces of oriental good looks, almost lost in the fat that obliterated all its distinctive features, was radiant with joy ; his large eyes glittered under his thick black brows, above his crooked nose. He turned sharply to two girls who were standing just behind him, watching his every movement. His short arms waved affectedly against the background of the girls' dark, boarding-school style of dresses with short sleeves ; he made some remark. Then he turned back with an agile, youthful twist and threw a flac for a large stake across to the senior croupier. It flew high above the lamp, was neatly caught and dropped into the bowl for tips. " Hey, mademoiselle ! " he called. " Coffee and liqueurs ! Two Curaçaos for the young ladies and a Benedictine for me." Behind the oak buffet placed along one wall of the large

salon Krystyna reluctantly filled the glasses : she did not like the wealthy Greek, who was notorious for his pursuit of teen-agers.

Now fresh guests came to the table, among them the Dutchman Van Loos, a long hop-pole of a man with a sharp hooked nose and a shock of fair hair. He greeted the Greek and his girls, who had eyes only for the buffet. Then a gentleman with a moustache that looked as though it had been stuck on carelessly—one end was slipping into his mouth—escorting two second-class demireps with heavily painted faces adorned with beauty patches, and scattering a reeking perfume. A couple of young countrymen, bulls with sanguine, sunburnt faces, their biceps swelling painfully in the tight worsted of their coatsleeves. ‘Twerps!’ Krystyna thought as she went past them with the tray.

“Mesdames, messieurs, faites vos jeux!”

As she pushed through the crowd of players, Krystyna caught sight of a face which she had not seen here before. Yet it struck her as familiar. Surely she knew that square jaw and that fair hair, combed back sleekly! But where and when had she seen it?

The Greek drank his coffee absently, handing Krystyna a five-hundred zloty note.

“Don’t bother about the change,” he said over his shoulder, as he staked a pile of grand flats on number fifteen : he was playing to the roulette.

“Good evening,” she heard a familiar voice right in her ear : it was the square-jawed man. Now she remembered him : he was Victor from ‘Basia’s’. It was not surprising that she had not recognized him at once : he was wearing an elegant, very long and broad-fitting dark blue jacket, an exquisite tie, beautifully pressed trousers.

“Good evening,” she smiled at him as she recalled ‘Chrysanthemum’ and ‘Stan was a cripple’. “And what are you doing?”

"Nothing exciting," he pointed indifferently to a pile of stakes worth at least fifty thousand zlotys. "I'm having a little flutter just to kill time."

"Krystyna!" she heard her father's voice, calling her from the entrance hall.

She hurried out. He was standing with another man by a coat-stand loaded with gentlemen's summer coats and ladies' wraps. Mr. Salinski was short, thickset and bald headed, with a full, almost chubby face adorned with a small, upturned moustache. The other man was young, fair, of medium height, with thoroughbred and rather old-world features, so to speak; his pleasant, rather ironic hint of a smile and vivid, observant eyes suggested a man of refinement, a man who knew his road, even though it might be a dangerous one in certain circumstances.

Krystyna welcomed the younger man with a shake of the hand. "Daddy," she said, "this is Count Adam Cichocki, the man I suggested for our new croupier."

Salinski gave Cichocki and his dinner-jacket a swift, appraising glance. "My daughter has told me about you," he said, holding out his puffy hand. "But she didn't give me any details of your professional qualifications."

"Well, I broke the bank at Monte Carlo," Cichocki replied. "That was in 1916; I expect you heard all about it. Later I lost three hundred thousand zlotys in one evening at roulette: pre-war zlotys, of course."

Salinski looked at him with respect:

"Ah, I remember that. The papers were full of it. You're from Rzeszow district, aren't you? Did you know Miss Dzierzanska of Laka?"

"She's my aunt. In 1919 she remained on the Russian side of the demarcation line."

A sharp ring at the bell interrupted this exchange of memories just as it was taking a friendly turn. Salinski glanced anxiously at the door as the porter opened it: it was

already past the curfew hour. When he recognised the new guests he hastened up to them with a beaming smile.

"Bonsoir, mon colonel, bonsoir, mon lieutenant ! Enchanté de vous voir, enchanté." He welcomed the two arrivals with excessive cordiality.

"That's Von Wiesen," Krystyna whispered, drawing Cichocki further into the hall and giving him a meaning wink. "The Warsaw town major. And his adjutant. They always talk French here."

With a single glance Cichocki memorised the faces of the colonel, a Prussian aristocrat, and his adjutant, another Prussian. They removed their expensive evening coats, revealing well-cut dinner jackets. Colonel von Wiesen stood for a moment chatting affably to Salinski. He was about fifty, tall, dry, and of very handsome build, emphasised by his distinguished, though rather too stiff bearing. His face, clean-shaven, pale, and maybe lightly powdered, looked like a perfectly moulded papier mâché mask ; not one feature betrayed any human feeling, the monocle in his left eye glittered coldly. His adjutant presented an appearance of striking contrast ; boyish, and as rosy as a new-born pig, he smiled with full, crimson lips and looked about him with a carefree air, obviously in search of feminine company.

Salinski conducted the German officers into the hall. A minute or two later he returned to his daughter and Cichocki ; the professional smile with which he had welcomed his most important guests still lingered on his face.

"All right, Mr. Cichocki," he said, "we'll give you a week's trial. You can take things easy for the time being, and get the hang of the place ; you'll start at the second shift. Krystyna will look after you."

"Rien ne va plus," the croupier called, Miss Salinska led Cichocki to her usual post behind the bar. The buffet was deserted, and she was able to comment to him on various of the guests present in the room.

" You see those two ladies, the grey-haired and the blonde ? They're old Golocka and her daughter ; the mother would sell her daughter for a couple of stakes without batting an eyelid. I expect you know that man with the black moustache ? You don't ? He's Cwierski, a former landowner ; at one time he had a fine collection of pictures ; now he deals in works of art. I see he's brought two of his lady-friends with him. That older man sitting opposite is a Greek, Fantulis ; our maid says his head grows out of his belly. Those two skinny creatures behind him are chiefly concerned with foreign currency transactions, but they don't mind dealing in gold and jewellery. The couple at the corner are the Le Blancs, they're French ; no one knows what they live on or where they get their stake money. Those two are farmers : I call them ' twerps '."

Cichocki took stock of the players gathered round the table.

" But all these are small fry," Krystyna whispered. " They're not of any importance, not to us at least. But that man to the left of the roulette, in horn spectacles ; take a good look at him : his name's Schwartz. He's a Polish-born German who works in the Labour Department and sells labour cards by the kilogramme to Poles on the side. And Von Wiesen's adjutant Willy will be useful too ; when he's drunk he chatters away like a child. The Dutchman . . . "

" Miss !" A servant came in from the hall, and interrupted her explanations. " There's someone wants to see you."

" What ? At this time of night ? But it's gone ten !"

Suddenly anxious, she ran out into the hall, closing the door behind her :

" Kostek ! What are you doing here ? What's happened ?"

A young man, bareheaded, a raincoat flung over his pyjamas, shoes on bare feet, was standing just inside the door ; he was as white as paper, panting for breath. Krystyna

hurried him into her room—the one in which Marek had spent the night a month or so previously. Kostek sat down heavily on the divan, drawing his breath sharply with pain. He linked both hands round one knee.

“Bad news, Krystyna,” he said with difficulty. “Bad news . . . The Gestapo have raided the district centre . . . Stefan’s . . . Eight Traugutt Street, in the back block . . . Hell, it hurts !” He broke off and put his hand to his foot. “The back block, first floor . . . I jumped from the balcony.”

Krystyna snatched up a towel and soaked it in water. “Roll up your trousers,” she ordered, “I’ll put on a compress. You can stay here the night.”

“Don’t bother about me !” he interrupted her. “You haven’t heard everything yet : listen while I can talk.” He forced the words out slowly. “They took Stefan away . . . they left two Gestapo-men there : I heard the orders through the balcony window. I was hiding in the cellar.”

A sudden rush of energy brought him to his feet. He seized her by the arm and shook her desperately :

“Don’t you see ?” he raised his voice. “Listen : in that room are the plans for the district mobilization . . . in the stove . . . the third tile up from the bottom left-hand corner.” He gulped for air, like a fish thrown up on the beach. “Stefan’s in bad shape, his nerve’s gone ; a couple of whacks and he’ll spill the beans . . . They’ll be back again within two hours.”

He clutched his head with his hands as though trying to squeeze some means of salvation from it. Then he twisted slowly and fell on to the divan, burying his face in the cushions.

Krystyna’s mind worked swiftly, all the wisdom of her eighteen years concentrated on seeking a means of rescuing the papers. “Cichocki ? He hasn’t got a gun ; it’s no job for him.” She stood for a moment gazing into space, across the insensible lad on the divan, through the wall, through the fumes of cigarette-smoke. Suddenly she recalled

a square face, strong, bold eyes. ' Victor !'

She ran out into the gaming hall, locking her bedroom door behind her.

7

" HAVE YOU got a gun on you ?" Krystyna asked when Victor entered her room.

His square-cut face smiled indulgently. He carelessly drew back the edge of his broad jacket ; a ' Vis ', a favoured weapon of his profession, was thrust into his belt, ready for immediate use. He stood silent ; with a sure intuition he took in the position : the helplessness of the lad thrown down on the couch, the fervour of the girl who was desperate for something to be done. He waited.

" Mr. Victor," she began, choosing her words, the keys that would open his heart. " You see . . . something awful has happened : the Gestapo has raided one of our centres. We've got to act at once . . . it isn't far : No. 8, Traugutt Street. Only you . . . "

He did not bat an eyelid. Unconcerned, foreign, almost as though he were not there, he gazed calmly into her eyes.

" Don't you see ?" she went on, seizing him by the arm. " There are important papers there, mobilization plans affecting hundreds . . . thousands of people . . . addresses . . . of arms dumps . . . They've caught one of our men, and he may talk . . . They've left two armed Gestapo-men behind. In an hour or so it'll be too late."

She gazed at him with imploring eyes that bored into him. She tried to smile ; her youthful face lit up with a shy, pleading gleam. Without effect.

"That's politics," Victor said. "That's not my line. I'm just an ordinary wide boy."

"But you're a Pole!" she exclaimed. "Remember what you said at the café? You're fighting the Germans too. Besides," she went on after a pause, "it may be useful to you some day, we shan't forget it. I'll report you for a mention . . ."

"I don't care a damn! I'll get a cross anyway . . . on my grave."

He turned to the door. She stopped him with a last desperate resort:

"I'll give you money. How much do you want?"

She ran to her dressing table and searched feverishly in a drawer. Victor's eyes flashed. As she held out a wad of banknotes, their eyes met again. Her hand was trembling; the gangster gazed at her with a look of infinite pity.

"Put that muck away," he said in a queer, hissing tone. "Put it away while I feel good. My Vis ain't for sale."

He controlled himself, and choked his anger down.

"All right, my dear young lady," he said calmly, with an ironic look. "I'll go. But not for the 'cause'. I'll go because I feel like it. Not for your plans and the officer gentry who're hiding around in holes. Just to please myself; get me? Just to please myself."

Krystyna dropped her hand; the banknotes scattered over the floor.

"Where is it? And where are the papers hidden?" he asked practically; he was already drawing up a plan of operations.

"It's on the first floor, in the back block, on the left. The name's Stasiak, Stefan Stasiak. But be careful - there are two Gestapo-men in there, they're sure to have automatics."

"That's not your worry," he instinctively raised his left hand and thrust it into his breast under his jacket, as

though he were adjusting his braces. "Where are the papers you spoke of?"

"In the stove," a voice came from the couch. The lad raised himself a little and rested his head on his palm. "Left-hand corner, third tile from the bottom."

"If you can't bring them back, destroy them," Krystyna added, gazing at Victor as if he were an angel.

"Don't you worry," the pleasant smile returned to the gangster's face; it was belied by the wolfish gleam in his eyes. "You sit pretty here, I'll be back in an hour . . . with the papers. So long."

He went out. A moment later they heard a door closed quietly. He was going down the stairs; he had gone out without bothering to get his overcoat.

He walked unconcernedly along Krakowskie Street, a solitary black figure in the dark emptiness. He turned into Traugutt Street. He was lucky: the dimmed headlights of a German patrol-car swept round a corner just as he was passing a deep archway. He pressed against the archway wall; the car sped past and did not stop.

His conversation with the house-porter at No. 8 was short.

"Who d'you want?" the little, frightened man with a great-coat flung over his nightshirt asked him. The man held the wicket-door of the gate ajar, but would not let him enter.

"I want Stasiak," Victor put his foot in the gap between the door and the frame.

The porter took a swift glance at him by the faint light from his cubby-hole in the archway. He still had his hand on the door-lock.

"It's no use your going there; Stasiak's ill."

"Mind your own bloody business. Let me in." Victor pushed hard at the door; the old man was forced to jump back. He threw his arms wide, to bar the dangerous opening.

"Don't go up, I warn you. There are . . ."

"Piss off!" Victor's shove sent the man flying along the wall.

"But wait till I come back. Here's something for a drink." He took a five-hundred-zloty note out of his pocket and thrust it into the eager, always open hand.

As he went upstairs, his favourite song, "Stan was a cripple," came into his head.

He knocked. The door was opened. He passed through, blinking in the strong light.

"Please come in," a man in civilian clothes affably invited him with a sweeping gesture.

Two steps forward—the door closed quietly behind him—then the pressure of a revolver barrel between his shoulders.

"Hands up!"

He obeyed without protesting, folding his hands on his head. The affable fellow swiftly ran his hands down him. He snatched the pistol out of Victor's belt and, taking it by the barrel, brought the butt down on his head with a powerful blow, once, twice, thrice: the established procedure, almost an act of mercy, half stunning the victim.

Victor was not a victim, he knew quite well what awaited him here. He only swayed a little like a paling shaken hard, but set firmly and deep. His cold eyes did not film with pain, his lips emitted no groan: he had a tough head.

"Excuse me, lieutenant, there must be a little mistake. Please, follow me." The civilian, a well-built, dark-haired man, smiled amiably again. The pressure of the barrel in his back forced the gangster into the middle of a large room.

Without moving his head, with two glances he took in the details of the room: a cupboard and couch on the right; two windows (one with a balcony) on the left; a desk set crossways, by the balcony entrance; a tiled heating stove in the wall next to the stairs.

"Take it easy, lieutenant," the civilian Gestapo-man pointed to an armchair in front of the desk. "You can put

your hands down. Cigarette?"

He held out a gold cigarette-case engraved with a monogram and the Star of David in one corner. Victor sat down, resting his hands on the arm of the chair.

"Please, please do have one," the agent forced the case on him. The second man, a fair-haired and freckled fellow with a Schmeisser automatic, sat down in a chair between the windows, keeping his eyes fixed on Victor. He laid the automatic across his knees.

"I suppose you came here on official business, lieutenant?" the dark-haired man began, as Victor deeply inhaled the smoke of his cigarette. He had sat down very close to the gangster, still holding the Vis by the barrel. He spoke fluent Polish without the least trace of a foreign accent. His green, cat's eyes glowed in his swarthy face. He juggled with smiles like a juggler with the flash of knives: they were evil and menacing.

"You're quite wrong, I assure you," Victor said calmly. "I'm not a lieutenant, I've never been in the army. There's some mistake somewhere. I had some business to talk over with a Mr. Skiba, but I must have got the wrong apartment. This is number fifteen, isn't it?"

"Ha-ha-ha!" the man laughed. "A good story! You're fond of your joke, lieutenant."

Victor snubbed him with a hard stare.

"It must be you that's joking. You don't know who you're dealing with. I've got permission to carry arms; I've got documents. Look . . ."

He hissed with pain: a blow, swift as lightning, with the pistol butt; his left hand fell back helplessly on the chair-arm before he could feel in his coat pocket for his letter-case.

"Oh, don't put yourself to any trouble, my dear lieutenant," the dark man said, smiling again. "I can find your documents for myself."

He neatly took out the case, then Victor's identity card. He gave it one keen glance, tore off the photograph with a single tug, and examined the document under the light.

"Beautiful! Perfect!" he said at last. "How much did you pay for it? A splendid forgery, absolutely first-class. Your people are making great progress."

"It's genuine," Victor said, quite unperturbed. "You can soon check up on that; it was issued here in Warsaw. You've only got to 'phone up the identity-card department."

He looked about him, as though looking for a telephone. The fair-haired man yawned quite openly, and set the Schmeisser down with the butt on the floor, the barrel between his knees.

"That's not all," the gangster continued. "I'm working for war-industry—you'll find the certificate in my case—and I'm in touch with the police. The number of the pistol you've got in your hand is registered with the authorities in Ujazdowskie Avenue. Pity there isn't a 'phone here."

The dark man gazed at Victor, smiling with the most honied of smiles. He appeared to be delighted at the way the conversation was going. But he did not reach out for the case, which he had thrown down on the desk. He kept the Vis in his hand.

"Of course, of course it may be just a mistake. You'll have a chance of explaining in a more satisfactory place. We shan't keep you here long."

Rising and shifting the pistol to his left hand, the stretched out his right for a bottle on a table in one corner. He set it down on the desk, brought two glasses, and poured out two vodkas.

"You mustn't refuse me, lieutenant," he said, handing Victor a glass. "It's a pleasure to drink with such a capable fellow. You've got good nerves. And a strong head," he added.

Victor took the glass in his left hand, though his wrist

hurt where the revolver had struck him, and he had difficulty in gripping the stem. He tossed off the vodka in one gulp, watching out of the corner of his eyes what the fair man was doing. He was lighting a cigarette ; the Schmeisser was still between his knees. The strong vodka flowed into Victor's stomach, warming and strengthening him. It would be going to his head in a moment : he had eaten nothing since dinner-time.

" It's not nerves," he said as he put the glass down. " I'm not worried in the least, you see, I know more than you do. I guess I've got into some conspirator's apartment by mistake."

The black-haired man slowly sipped his vodka, staring at the gangster fixedly. The fair-haired man puffed at his cigarette. He leaned the automatic against the wall and looked about him for something ; for a third glass, probably.

" Yes," Victor went on in a calm, normal tone ; " now I remember perfectly : Skiba lives on the second floor. I was thinking over things as I came up, and I must have knocked at the door below."

The dark man finished his vodka and poured more into the glasses : a drop at the bottom for himself, to the brim for Victor.

" Skiba, did you say ? What's his Christian name ?"

" Edward," Victor replied without hesitation. " He's a mechanical engineer. He works at Mielec, and he's come to Warsaw for a week."

" Well, that's fine, that's fine ! But perhaps he's already gone on to Szucha Street ?" (He again flashed his smile : the Gestapo headquarters were in Szucha Street.) He changed his tone : " In any case, that can be cleared up ; they'll be coming for you in a moment. I hope they'll send a limousine for such a valuable guest," he returned to his ironic mood

" But meanwhile, one for the road !"

Holding the Vis in his left hand, he gave Victor his glass

with the right. The gangster had already decided his course of action. He took the glass with his left hand and steadied it on the chair-arm. He glanced swiftly to his left: the Schmeisser was leaning against the wall; the fair-haired man was leaning back on the chair, with his long legs stretched out.

"Delighted!" Victor shouted. He started up and threw the vodka into the dark man's eyes. In his right hand flashed a spare pistol, snatched from a pouch fastened high up between his shoulders. The two shots sounded almost as one. The smiling agent dropped headlong beside the overturned table; as he fell the fair man struck his head against his own automatic, sending it clattering heavily to the floor.

Victor took in the result with one swift glance: the dark man was already stiffening. The other convulsively threw out one arm, as though to indicate that he too was departing: it wasn't worth wasting another shot on him.

Now the gangster got a move on. He thrust the pistol into his pocket, and went swiftly to the stove. "The third tile from the bottom, on the left-hand side."

He tugged, digging his nails into the plastered chink; the tile came away easily. He thrust in his hand eagerly . . . the hole was empty, no trace of papers.

He stepped back a couple of paces. He stared at the stove, thinking. Not one muscle in his face betrayed the tension gathered under his tough head, though in that head the thoughts shone out and died away like electric sparks, one moment flowing fluently along a chain of logical reasoning, then gathering haphazardly in his puzzled brain, as he sought for a solution, or inspiration.

He stood a long time motionless, staring at the tiled stove, as though he expected it to speak to him with the voice of the secret papers, with a cry from the souls of those who were in peril. At last he stepped forward; he groped at the third

tile from the bottom on the right. It did not give ; beneath his pistol butt it sounded hard and unfriendly.

He ran his palms down the stove. Several swift turns of the screw fastening the door, then a tug, and his right hand groped inside the furnace. Yes, of course, that was it ; a tile slipped down ; it had been clumsily held in position by the door.

He straightened up and turned to the light, to examine his find—swag unusual in his career, absurdly valueless, yet important. He was just raising the sooty envelope, lost in thought as never before, perhaps astonished at it all, when suddenly . . .

A sudden fear—a rare visitor in his sanguinary life—rendered him impotent for half a second, thrust at him and pressed him hard against the stove. He knew it was the end : he heard the sound of the shots as though on credit, even before the needle touched the cap : he saw all that was happening as though through a magnifying glass : then he saw more, he peered behind a parted curtain . . .

From below him, from almost floor level, the fair-haired agent was gazing up at the gangster : his face shining, streaming with sweat, distorted with revenge, flaming with frenzy. The man's right arm, quivering with convulsive effort, was supporting the upper part of his body, rendering its last effective service. The bellows of his lungs were pumping heavily, panting with mortal agony. In an incredible concentration of will his left hand had managed to grab at his automatic, to rest the barrel on the upturned chair, and point it at Victor. His trembling fingers slipped over the steel of the lock with a stubborn, irregular rhythm ; one finger sprang down to the trigger ; then an ebb of strength—half a second rest—another spasm of will : closer . . . only a last, insignificant resistance . . . now, now, at last . . . or . . .

Victor toppled forward and rolled up like all who are shot in the belly. The burst was short, a single burst ; the

German did not fire again. He had done his work, now he spat out his soul with the blood pouring from an internal haemorrhage ; he fell face downward and stained the parquet crimson. So they lay together, almost head to head : two enemies, two strong men . . . perhaps brothers in frenzy and suffering.

Within him Victor heard his own life roaring with a violent, ebbing wave. He felt that wave on his lips as a sweetish taste ; he felt it in his racked entrails quivering with pain ; he saw the blood from his severed pulses flowing out of him, leaving him by his lips, his ears, his nose, congealing on the floor in dirty streaks and patches—unnecessary, wasted, or—who knows ?—both liberated and liberating at once. When, as he lay still on his side, he raised one hand to his face, it spurted on to his fingers. The sooty envelope had slipped out of his hand, and rested on the floor just by the dying German's shock of fair hair.

Victor stared at his palms : powerful, rapacious, spattered with blood—with, for the first time, his own blood.

He stretched himself out, changed his position. Evidently some beneficent clot had dammed the flow : the stains on the floor were congealing, unreinforced by any new efflux. The pain had stopped almost completely, a great weariness came over him : an impotent, yet active labour of brain and nerves ; drowsiness and indifference, alienation from all things close and urgent ; a sudden vision of things hitherto unknown, thrust away with a curse with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders . . .

Even for anger and regret there was no place. His head was filled with pictures, faces, tunes, and smiles—some rustle of his childhood (or maybe of a forest ?), then tears and groans, but not his own : groans from those who emerged out of bloodshed in past time. Jud'ka in a village outside Warsaw, who had taken two hours to die, castrated, with shattered testicles (he had refused to hand over the sparklers);

old Radka, a Polish-born German who worked in the National Savings Bank, who had spat blood all over the safe as he snatched time and again at the keys in the gangster's hand—and so very many others. And then a smile like a flower on a bomb site, and a cry—a girl's face, "thank you, Victor"; grateful eyes, full of admiration; a lad flung down on a couch . . . "don't you see? . . ." "papers" . . . "they've caught one of our men" . . . groans, a green dress, banknotes on the floor, hands white and gentle; "that's not your worry" . . . "I shall be back . . . in an hour."

"The packet . . . Krystyna . . . ! The packet . . . Krystyna." Something began to flutter in his clattering brain; cogs or pinions leapt into an interlocking position, slowing down the rush of pictures. ". . . the packet . . . Krystyna" . . . "the packet . . . Krystyna"; and then: "Stove . . . third . . . tile . . . from the bottom . . . on the left . . ." "on the left . . ." "on the left . . ."

Damn the left! You bastards! What sort of job d'you call this?

His blood-stained palm rubbed his eyes ("packet . . . Krystyna . . . packet . . .") "Why, of course, I've got it: the envelope") then slowly passed over the floor, seized the secret papers.

It's quite possible to walk with a couple of holes in your belly. Not far and not fast, but you can, if you're a 'wide boy'.

Victor raised himself very slowly. He pushed the envelope into the upper pocket of his jacket. He leaned against the stove, pressed his left hand to his belly; with his right he instinctively sought support, uncertain of his first step.

There was nothing he could hold on to. He glanced at the overturned chair from which the German had fired. The man was still breathing, though he could not raise his head, and could only follow Victor's movements with his left eye.

Those first three steps were heavy, painful, yet swift.

With his right hand he picked up the chair, stood it on its legs and, resting on the arm, shifted the Gestapo-man's head with his foot, to put him into a better position. Clinging to the chair with both hands for support, he stood on the man's neck; a faint crunch of broken bones—then peace: he wouldn't fire again, he wouldn't squeal now.

Victor set off on his last journey. Clinging to the banisters, he went downstairs, almost doubled up; he cautiously carried away his riddled guts, the remnants of his life, the sealed envelope. Half-way down he sat on a step for a moment. He closed his eyes. He was weak, but calm. He would have fallen asleep, would have remained there in the dark fetters of the stairs. He was aroused by a tune, a song which evidently had been vibrating in that place for an hour past, had clung to those walls ever since he had passed them on his way upstairs: 'Stan was a cripple'.

The ravine of the gateway, cloven by a spear of light. The helpful arm of the quick-witted porter. The grinding of a key in the lock.

"Thank you, I'll manage by myself. It ain't far."

The click of the door behind him, the darkness of the street in front. Emptiness. Blackness, with lighter spots: in space, in his eyes, in his thoughts. The black patch crawled along slowly, clinging to the walls. It halted, rested, and moved on again. Now it blended with the blackness of a gateway, shrank, pressed into the darkest corner.

To remain here, to remain! And never go on again. To die, to fall asleep, to rest... He stretched himself out full length. The tip of his tongue stung his gums with its bitter pressure; the stars, an army of needles thrusting down from above, pricked at his eyes. He closed his eyes...

A fountain spurts out of the grass, a baldachin of drops over his head, a rainbow of colour; a scent of childhood, of incense or hay; the taste of morning-made cream, strawberries, apples stolen from the orchard; a watery mist flows

over his eyes with a sobering, freshening caress ; a rough palm, but kind—his mother's palm takes her boy's head in its grasp, the song echoes : ' Stan, I'm still weeping for you . . . '

Victor sat up. The string of stars fled from before his eyes, but the tune continued in his head : obstinate, piercing through his drowsiness, his pain, his growing indifference. The words were threaded on the melody : words as banal as daily bread, as nourishing as black bread :

*' Though you come back a cripple, which God forbid,
I'll always gladly receive you again '.*

He dragged himself on, supported by the friendship of the walls. The street thrust the benevolent fragments of brick, the convenient grip of railings into his palms ; concealed him in the shadow of its houses. The fluid darkness in the porch of the former high school at the corner hid him from the lights of the German car which drove past and braked to a stop outside No. 8. Then the main street took the halting, staggering, seemingly drunken form into its protection.

He turned to the left ; he safely hobbled across the roadway to the farther corner of Traugutt Street. Opposite him loomed the solid block of the hospital, beyond it the clearer entrance gate of Warsaw University, shadowed with trees and an iron grille. Now he was close to his objective : just past that millinery shop, ' Old England ' it had been called in pre-war days, but the name had been changed ; then the restaurant ; two, or maybe three gateways. Very close—but how far !

Now he was coming to a halt every five . . . every three . . . at last at every two paces. The internal haemorrhage began again : the blood rose to his throat, he could anticipate the sweetish taste on his rigid tongue.

When, in its search for support, his left hand came up against the smooth glass of the shop window, he slipped heavily to the pavement right at the entrance. His head hung impotently between his hunched knees, the blood

spurted from his mouth. The nauseating smell quickened his dying instinct for life. He flung up his head, leaned backward, and rested it on the ledge of the shop-window.

Now his weakness was past ; now came obscurity : not even unpleasant, but strange, indescribable. The past emerged from the stream of time. It returned. It flung itself on him with a new, fuller, reversed, disintegrated and therefore synthetic life. It swept over him with the plastic movement of a vision stronger than reality, more real than the pain, the efflux of blood, and his mortal agony . . .

A twilight room . . . only two lighted candles. Three people—one man, a man flung down on the floor : Victor. Kneeling on him : Victor, the gangster. With his left hand the kneeling Victor is gagging his mouth, his right fist beats on the face (his own) with powerful blows. "Where's the dough?" he demands through his teeth—he hears the words above the roar of his pain. A negative movement of the battered head. Both hands grip into his hair, bash the head against the floor, once, twice, thrice. Strong eyes fixed on his own face—as though in a mirror. "Where's the dough?" No answer. A faint. Smack, smack, with one palm on the face. "Warm him up!" The third—Victor—calmly brings a candle close to a bare sole. A shock of pain, a hiss, the smell of burnt flesh. "I'll talk. It's in my boot." Victor, the torturer, removes the candle ; Victor, the victim, crawls under the bed, draws out his boots, takes banknotes from the hollowed sole ; Victor, the gangster, snatches at them greedily . . .

Greed and brutality ; pain inflicted and pain suffered ; hatred, obstinacy and ruffianism. And, at last, fear : fear of pain, of justice, of judgment. "Victor, Victor, Victor!"

The gangster started to his feet. He felt no pain. The name and the words returned like hope : "Krystyna—the packet—the papers." And yet again that melody, that old, familiar, soldier's melody : 'Stan, return, I forgive you ; . . .

return to me, O, return '.

He wanted to run : he thought he was running. He only walked—quite fast, stumbling, knocking against the wall. He fell on his face within a narrow beam of light. Delicate hands caught him up. They drew him into the gateway through the open wicket-door.

“ Done it !” he forced the words out in a whisper into the ear—Krystyna’s ear—set close to his lips. A shadow of a smile flickered in his eyes, twisted his lips with a mournful and childishly helpless grimace.

He managed to put one hand to his breast. Cichocki understood the gesture, expertly drew out the envelope, and stuffed it into his pocket.

Stan Kurek (professional name ‘ Victor ’) died on the stairs. They carried him up, slowly, very carefully.

8

OBERGRUPPENFUHRER RIESEL banged his fist on the desk.

“ No, no, and yet again, no ! Eighteen thousand ordinary police, twice as many security police, the Special Security Service, and the Self-Defence force : isn’t that enough for you ? And the use and—as Vogel writes to me from the army command—the abuse of the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe ? All that not enough to hold down a few million Poles ?”

He snatched up a typewritten sheet laying on the green blotting paper before him and thrust it away with a contemptuous gesture.

“ Parteigenosse Hahn,” he turned to the older of the two officers buried stiffly in their deep arm-chairs, “ you’d better

forget your day-dreams. Your plan for increasing the police administration of Warsaw district is far too bold, in fact it's sheer impudence. Don't you understand that, Herr Hahn? Or perhaps . . . " he lowered his voice and spoke through his teeth: " . . . you prefer not to understand?"

He stubbed his unfinished cigar in the crystal ashtray and threw his head back against his chair-arm. He passed his eyes over the officers' faces: peremptorily, authoritatively, in full accordance with regulations.

He had played all but his last card: he knew that. But he rather counted on his spectacles not to give him away: the thick glass glittered, reflecting the lamp-light and hiding his emptiness, his weariness.

But there was no point in prolonging this game of stern looks, especially as they had a better riposte, replying with silence. He rose abruptly and went to the window. He stared down into the quiet Szucha Street, over the crowns of the chestnuts. He knew it well, he had been here several times before. When he left Berlin he knew in advance what he would say, and what they would say to him: the same as they had said in Prague, in Belgrade, in Paris and Brussels. He knew it all by heart.

And what could he say in answer? Quote the top secret reports from the Eastern Front? Or betray Headquarters' secret plans for extracting the most youthful vitality and the last remnants of elderly energy from the Reich? No; he had to play out the comedy within the framework of the established conventions, to resort to the same nuances of words, gestures, and ostensible decisions that he had used everywhere during his journeys of inspection. He had to play at being the strong man, though at bottom . . .

He drummed his fingers on the window-pane, standing with his back to the desk. He had played his hand, now he waited. In a moment Hahn would fire his salvo of statistics, while Kempinsky would take his classic 'case' out of his document

case. "But quicker, quicker!" he thought. "Get on with it, my boys." He turned sharply.

"Well, Hahn?" he asked.

"Herr Obergruppenfuhrer," the head of the Warsaw Gestapo began at last, "it seems to me that Berlin is making just one mistake, so far as work in this country is concerned. This is special service, this is an exception. This isn't France with its several millions of rentiers, with papa Pétain, and a few hundred adolescents playing at a resistance movement. Here we haven't any 'great-hearted' Leopold, going with his men into captivity. On the other hand, we've got the Eastern Front—you know even more about that than we do. Today the 'Gouvernement-General' is immediately behind the front line. Things aren't pleasant here, or safe. The latest statistics show . . ."

"Don't bother about those papers," Riesel snapped as Hahn reached for his document case. "You can leave out all your damned hash of figures."

"Very good, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer," Hahn said calmly (he hadn't had much hope that that trick would come off), "I'll talk in general terms; we send the statistics to headquarters regularly. You are well aware that the situation has changed radically during the past year, even the last few months. Banditry . . ."

"I don't want to hear anything on that subject," his superior barked angrily. "The Geheime Staatspolizei is a political force. You've got the Criminal Police for dealing with banditry."

"You must excuse me," Gruppenfuhrer Kempinsky intervened from the other arm-chair. "We simply can't rely on them. They're just scum, demoralized rabble: a few reliable men at the top, but under them a horde of corrupted juniors, black marketeers. And in addition the majority of their Polish agents are in touch with the Home Army intelligence: all sorts of combinations, bah! even their

sentiments ! . . . ”

“ And besides,” Hahn joined in, “ remember that we ourselves demoralized them. You recall the instructions issued in 1941 and 1942. Everything was all right so long as the bandits attacked the Jews and the Poles—their own people ; that was playing into our hands. We encouraged them, we protected them, especially as they drew the best men in the underground movement off political work. I expect you remember the special reports on the cases of Wolanski, Piatkowski, Glina . . . ”

Riesel sat down at his desk. He pretended to be listening patiently ; after all, they had to talk, that was part of the programme. Mentally he was back in his villa outside Berlin, in his (once) quiet and (until recently) safe family house. But only yesterday evening, just before the mechanic had swung the propellor on the Berlin aerodrome, the wail of a siren had sounded. As they rose into the air the tortured Reich capital was thrusting the swordblades of its searchlights into the sky, groping with them nervously, densely, but not very effectively ; an A.A. shell had burst a hundred yards ahead of the plane ; below them bombs were exploding.

That was the picture Riesel had brought with him to Szucha Street. Intertwined with it were faces, close, yet today how distant ! He was a good husband, a kind father, a lover of domestic animals. Hahn's words came up against this picture, they sprinkled through Riesel's ears like sand through a fine sieve.

“ Unfortunately,” Hahn was saying, “ this policy proved inexpedient ; I'll go further, it was positively harmful. And that in many respects. To begin with, it demoralized the Criminal Police ; it became the rule for them to wink at crime. And now their agents are on friendly terms with the bandits, often they go so far as to hire themselves out to the bandits for a specific job. Secondly, today banditry is directed eighty per cent. against Germany and German institutions,

or against those Polish organizations that collaborate with us. The 'wide boys' have turned out to be Poles after all. Finally—and perhaps this is the worst feature of the situation—the Underground has succeeded in localizing, I might even say canalizing, banditry; in their own sphere they condemn the 'wild' banditry, as they call it, but they use the most capable of the bandits, the strongest characters, for big military and political jobs. That pays both sides: the criminals get impunity as well as good pay, while the Underground leaders win authority and popularity among the protected population. You know, of course, that the extreme right specializes in such matters."

Hahn stopped. He realized that Riesel was not listening very closely. He had no faith in the effectiveness of his arguments, he simply regarded attack as the best form of defence. "Let Kempinsky do the worrying," he was thinking, he preferred that the inevitable, final counter-attack to be launched by his superior officer should be directed against his assistant. Kempinsky took up his ungrateful rôle with a resigned air.

"Today everything's in a thorough mess," he began in a quiet, monotonous voice, as though he were reading a lecture. "Today it's quite impossible to tell who is a bandit, and who is fighting for an ideal. Take the Turek affair, for instance;" he laid his case of documents on the desk. "I already had a dossier of documents on this individual (he's commonly known as 'The Ape') when he was brought in a week ago. He's an old hand as a bandit, the Criminal Police have released him three times despite glaring proofs of his activities. His latest act was to attack a goods train loaded with arms."

Riesel saw a good opportunity. He snatched up the documents and brought them down violently on the desk.

"This is too much!" he roared. "I haven't come here to study documents about bandits. Nor to increase the security organization at the cost of the armed effort in the East."

"On the contrary," he went on much more quietly, but very emphatically. "I have instructions to increase that effort. Parteigenosse Himmler is of the opinion that a good deal of military talent is going to waste in home service, and not yielding good results even there. There has been some talk about you, Parteigenosse Hahn; you have excellent qualifications for commander of an artillery regiment. And you too, Herr Gruppenfuhrer Kempinsky: I believe you are an infantry major?"

He made a theatrical pause. He had played his last card. The glass of his spectacles glittered coldly, like the ice on Russian roads in winter-time. The two figures shrank in their large armchairs, so comfortable, so homelike.

"However, I think," he adopted a more affable tone, "that you can improve your results. You must use your imagination, operate on a large scale. A few public executions will have a very good effect on these Poles. More round-ups in the city—I'll make your peace with Vogel somehow in regard to using the Wehrmacht. Auschwitz camp is developing rapidly, we're nearly finished with liquidating the Jews. It's time to deal with the Poles."

"Certainly, certainly, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer," Hahn assented.

"Of course, we'll try," Kempinsky said eagerly. "The plans have been long ready. We could . . ."

"Details later," Riesel interrupted. "I'm not leaving till tomorrow evening. It's late already; time we had something to eat."

When, after a good supper, they entered the salon—one of the many excellently furnished rooms of the former Polish Ministry of Education—they were greeted by the sounds of classical piano music. Frédéric Chopin, immortal though banned, was speaking to them through the fingers of a Gestapo officer.

Riesel knitted his brows and stopped short—he was a lover of music, he knew every note of Chopin. The player did not stop. Only after a minute or two did he notice the Berlin visitor's face and rank. He broke off and sprang to attention. The echo of the unfinished Nocturne died into silence.

"Please go on playing," Riesel said gently, rather too gently.

Rudolf Roth sat down at the piano and began to play Mozart's 'Rondo Alla Turca'.

Riesel looked round the salon. It was a fairly large room, with three closely curtained windows. The furniture was late Empire, a Persian carpet covered the floor, good pictures hung on the walls—no one knew where they had been stolen from. In one corner, by a side table two young men in Gestapo uniform were standing stiffly to attention, waiting for the 'brass-hats' to take their seats. With them, or possibly only close to them, was a young woman in an exquisite gown. She was sitting lost in thought, nestling comfortably but discreetly in her arm-chair: a dark patch against the background of sea-green upholstery, glaringly present, yet alien, looking almost unnecessary.

"Heil Hitler!" Riesel said clearly, stiffly raising his hand and looking at the lady. She did not move.

"Who is that?" he asked Hahn, when they reached the table in the centre of the room.

"A Pole; some impossible name: Schinska or something. Rather arrogant, but intelligent and useful."

"Attractive, very attractive; almost a beauty!" Riesel said, sitting down and adjusting the pince-nez on his nose.

Maria Krynska was utterly and completely bored. The French, almost her native wine, was making her head sing. But it was mingled with a different kind of music: a mysterious flow of melody, incorporeal, transforming all her physical

being ; volatile, yet heavy with the colour of past events, of returning phrases, unexpectedly resurrected faces. Chopin : torment and liberation . . . salvation ; reward, or possibly punishment ?

She returned to reality slowly, reluctantly. She was irritated by the faces, by those at the main table, and these near at hand ; Franz Ludwig's arrogant, Heinrich's rosy, smiling face. Even Rudi's back as he sat at the piano seemed dull and commonplace.

The words of her companions for the evening bounced against her ears : they had already returned to their interrupted, highly professional conversation. Heinrich Weisendorff cast restless and greedy glances at her ; she did not reciprocate with the eloquence of her eyes, nor even with the shadow of a smile.

" Pour me out some wine," she said at last.

She absently picked up a photograph album lying on the table before her. Roth began to play Debussy's ' Gollywog's Cakewalk '.

She turned over the pages slowly, looking at photograph after photograph. Faces, nothing but faces : a complete collection of faces. Those captured had numbers on their chests, and often footnotes in red ink : ' liquidated ', and a date. Those hunted, without numbers, were taken sometimes full length, more frequently a head and shoulders. Women too, and girls, almost children. Animals, hunted in a murderous battue ? No : enemies in a desperate struggle, a stern defence, now almost an offensive. Human beings, Poles, men and women : faces young and old, intelligent and stupid, some bold, others gentle ; smiling or serious, fixed in thought, in care, or perhaps in anger ; frivolous or concentrated ; striking, or colourless, grey as ash, undistinguished. The faces of leaders, bandits, daredevils, soldiers. Some of them well known . . .

She turned over another page, and came to a face, the

last but one in the album. Surely not . . . ?

She stared at the youthful features, distorted, swollen, provided with a number. It must be he. She closed her eyes to conceal her agitation. For a brief second she was back in the apartment she had had to vacate in Wilcza Street, sitting over a chessboard, facing a pistol which would not shoot.

She quickly gained control of herself and glanced at the note beneath the photograph : " Gave name of Jan Kaminski. Arrested June 12, in Solec Street, with arms ; no identity papers."

She breathed more easily : that was only yesterday. She smiled at Heinrich—for the first time that evening.

" My dear, another glass, please," she said graciously. Then, after a long pause, and between smiles :

" This is one of your cases ; I think I know this young fellow."

Sturmbannfuhrer Heinrich Weisendorff glanced at the photograph. He raised his white hand and turned his thumb down :

" Already decided. He's dangerous. And to make things worse, he won't talk."

The sound of music leaked through the ceiling. Faint and intermittent, it grew strong again in sensitive ears, was intensified by the power of contrast, by the might of unexpected experience : Marek was found of music. But the ' Ape ' ?

Even he broke off the story of his last ' job ' , to listen to the feeble sounds soaking through from somewhere above ; a faint smile flickered on the gangster's battered blue and completely toothless face.

" The bastard plays well," he remarked.

They listened in silence : an extraordinary audience in an even more extraordinary hall. One long rag of a man flung

down on the floor ; a radiator, a grated window, an untouched loaf of bread, a mug, jam in paper ; another man in rather better condition sitting huddled with his back against the wall ; above the door a powerful electric lamp indifferently staring into vacancy. Nothing more. And into that hall wandered a Nocturne by Chopin.

When Roth suddenly broke off, the ' Ape ' continued the thread of his story, resting his head on one hand. He spoke with difficulty, but quite fast, as though urged on by some inner compulsion.

" We drove a Ford truck with a conversion unit behind it down to the assembly yards. We came to the railway along Wysocki Street, d'you know it ? That short street running past the railway workshops. It was eight o'clock, and quite light. No one around in the workshops. I says to Nipple—he was driving—' Something about this place stinks '. You see, we was to have been met by a railway-man, the one who had told us of the job.

" All right, never mind : we drive on boldly enough. We go past the depot, I stop the truck and take a look, and there they were : two wagons standing on the third siding, and farther over three more. But not all together : they were split up. One was quite close, the other two were further off, one on the left, the other on the right.

" ' Hold on,' I says to the boys, ' I'll go and see '. I'd got a feeling there was rather too many of those wagons around.

" I took Witek with me : that', the fair-haired young tike sitting opposite Victor that time at ' Basia's '. There was a workman hanging around the approach road, but not a sight nor smell of the German railway guards. I go over to the siding ; everything was all quiet : too blasted quiet, I can tell you. I check the numbers of those two wagons that was together on the third line : they fitted down to the dots. I climbs up and looks through the window : there was military material lying around just any old how : all of Russian pattern.

Heavy machine-guns, light machine-guns, Maxims, and the new air-cooled ones, and in one corner there was a pile of light machine-guns—some clever stunt with plates ; and in the centre I couldn't make out what : tripods, barrels, beds, all covered with tarpaulins. And all just as I'd been told."

He broke off. Marek wetted his handkerchief in the mug of water and laid it on the gangster's head. The 'Ape' shifted it farther back, drew himself a foot or so closer, raised the upper part of his body and went on, supporting himself on the floor with his elbows, his head against the wall. Above them, Roth finished playing Mozart ; some of the louder chords had penetrated to them, the quieter passages were filtered out by the ceiling.

" ' Fine ! ' I think to myself. I sends Witek back for the boys, while I stand figuring out how to open the doors : they were padlocked and sealed. They drove up in the Ford and jumped out, all ready with crowbars. I starts on the first wagon. Witek gives a hand. Nipple stops the engine and goes with Franek to start in on the second ; the others---there were eight of us altogether---waited by our old bus.

" I'd already got the door open when the fight began. The Germans let fly at us from all sides with machine-guns and automatics. I pull out my gun and slip under the wagon with Witek. ' We're done for ', was how I figured it. ' They've got us just where they want us '. Witek turns to me and asks : ' What sort of game is this ? ' I answer : ' We've had it, chum '. I should have mentioned they were firing from all the three wagons on the farther lines, from the signal box, and from the workshops too.

" The boys pulled out their guns, but what could they use them on ? They rushed to the Ford, and old Kowalski opened fire at the signal box. I took aim at a Fritz who showed a bit too much of himself round his machine-gun, and he went to glory.

" But my lads were getting it hot. They picked off Rudi

before Nipple could get the old stink-pot started. Lolo got one in the guts. Nipple got it worst of all, just as he drove on to the ramp. Me and Witek were just about to jump on—it was only five or six yards away, and we were well covered from that side—when they blazed away at the old bus and the driver. Nipple cried out, waved his hands and fell head first ; I suppose the door wasn't properly closed."

The 'Ape' sighed deeply, and adjusted the wet handkerchief on his head. He sat thinking for a moment, his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. But he was not aware of it : he seemed to be seeing his comrades.

"They picked off my lads one after another, like bugs off wallpaper. And me too, in the end . . . But that was later. When the Ford got hit, the gendarmes stopped firing. I took good aim and got another of them. Kulas was busy too : he gave it them pretty hot. And Rudi and Franek too.

"Suddenly one of them began to bawl through a megaphone :

" ' You're surrounded. Throw down your arms and come out on to the mainline. You're surrounded. Throw down your arms and come out . . . Throw down your arms . . . '

" ' Keep under cover ! ' I shouted to my lads. ' Don't waste your kisses ! ' We'd got an open truck, but it had steel sides. They took cover, there was three of them and the wounded Lolo left. Witek stayed with me under the wagon. They couldn't get at us at all : we were behind the solid wheels. But they picked off the others."

He stopped again, lost in thought. Perhaps he was listening to the Debussy which was seeping into the cell from the Empire salon. He sat up and rested his shoulders against the wall. He waved his hand :

"Just an open grave ! For my boys and me. They picked them off from above : they'd got us taped. They pumped lead into them out of heavy machine-guns on the workshop roof. Then two of the bastards climbed on top of

a wagon and opened fire from the other side. What hurt me most was when old Kowalski got it : they sprayed him three times, he'd got so much life in him. They got Kulas and Franek as they were lying on the floor ; I never saw them again.

" Then they stopped firing and the guy with the megaphone opened his trap :

" ' Throw down your arms and come out. We give you three minutes '.

" ' Three minutes ' , he repeated a second later ; and Witek, he says to me : ' Let's go out, Ape '.

" ' Lie where you are, where its good for you ' , I says. I laid down flat behind a wheel and looked at my magazine, I'd only got one cartridge left ; we hadn't come out with the idea of making war.

" ' Two minutes ' , the megaphone roared.

" ' Let's get out ' , Witek says, tugging at my sleeve. So I says to him :

" ' How many have you got left in your magazine ?'

" ' Two '.

" ' Then have one more good look at the world, and then put yourself out. And if one isn't enough for you, you've always got another ' . I took a glance at him : he was as white as chalk, and shivering. I ask him :

" ' Feeling cold, Witek ?'

" ' How do I know ? I may be ill for all I know '.

" But I think to myself : ' the kid's yellow '.

" ' One minute ' , the German bawls through the megaphone.

" I takes another look at Witek, and there he goes and throws his gun on to the line and starts crawling out after it. I shout at him :

" ' Come back ! ' "

" Why did you do that ?" Marek asked. " What else was he to do ?"

The gangster smiled ironically :

" All right, but he knew too much, didn't he ? If they'd taken him and started to put the screw on him he'd have squealed, and all our lads would have been carted off to jail. Besides, I don't like them when they're yellow."

He stopped suddenly. There was a dead silence. Now footsteps in the corridor outside syncopated a phrase of music.

" Well, and what happened then ?" Marek asked.

" I used my one cartridge on him. They took me like a sheep."

Worn out, he turned over on his side, his eyes away from the light. It lit up his strip of ear ; Marek changed the cold compress.

" Try to get some sleep," he said. " Everything may turn out all right : they may hand you over to the Criminal Police."

" Not this time. But you'll get out, I tell you that, I don't know how I know, but that's how it strikes me. As for me, I'm done for. I'm finished, brother. That job was too big, and besides, I haven't squealed. But I'm glad they put you and me in together."

He revived again. He set his lips close to Marek's ear and whispered for a long time.

" Remember the name," he said at last. " Genovefa Jurczyk, 21 Sliska Street. Tell her to share it out with the boys. She knows where to look for them."

" How much will it be altogether ?" Marek asked.

" I can't say," the ' Ape ' answered. " Something like a couple of million and more. Paper and gold, and sparklers too."

He closed his eyes ; the conversation was finished. Marek rose and went to stand below the window. Light music—it sounded like ' The Star of Rio '—floated down from above. The pleasant melody came more clearly to his ears through the closely shuttered but unglazed window.

He did not stand listening for long. A key grated in the lock.

"Kaminski!" The Ukrainian guard called him out.

The guard opened a door in the first floor corridor, and pushed him into a brilliantly lighted office. Four men stared at him: two Gestapo-men coldly and indifferently; a third, a civilian, with obvious ill-will; the fourth with considerable interest. Marek recognised the last man as the Sturmbannfuhrer who was dealing with his case.

He felt sure they had been talking about him: the civilian stopped in the middle of a sentence, gulping back the last word. He dropped one hand on his chair-arm without finishing his gesture.

"Come here," the Sturmbannfuhrer said in German, as Marek halted at the door.

He walked into the room and halted some three paces in front of the officer, who was half sitting, half leaning on the desk. The indolent, unmilitary pose, the horsewhip rising and falling in the grip of the white fingers, the smile on the full lips—it all seemed far too studied in its negligence. "Look out!" he told himself.

The officer was silent for a moment or two, staring at his prisoner. Korda returned the stare. "A good-looking fellow," he thought; "pity he's such a swine! But perhaps that's how it must be." The doubt troubled him; in the other man's eyes he read not hatred, but rather a gleam of interest, distinctive, private, and at the moment quite incomprehensible. "Well? Well? What is it you're after?" he felt like saying, and did say with his eyes.

"Sit down, please," the officer said at last.

Marek sat down; although he had adopted the tactic of 'not understanding German', for it gave him time to think, it was impossible not to understand the gesture indicating a chair. He was astonished: "why this change in treatment?"

Look out," he repeated mentally, as he waited for a sudden blow.

Nothing, nothing at all : absolutely idyllic ; out of the corners of his eyes he studied the others sitting unconcernedly a few paces to the left. One was gazing at the ceiling ; the second had raised his hand to his face as though hiding a yawn.

" Do you smoke ?" the officer asked, offering his cigarette case.

A moment of hesitation ; the lighter spluttered in the Getapo-man's hand. How good to smoke ! A passing dizziness, as the grace of the smoke filled his nostrils and lungs. As though through a haze he heard the officer ask, always in German :

" Have you anything to say ?"

" They'll be starting in a moment now ". Marek took a deep gulp of smoke, staring fixedly at the floor.

" Have you anything to say ?" the civilian agent asked sharply in Polish.

He shook his head. The officer said at once in a quiet, courteous tone :

" Herr Kaminski, we have just received some new information. Very interesting, really interesting ; you're a brave fellow."

Their eyes met. " What's he after ?" Marek wondered.

" I see ; you prefer not to talk. Good . . . " he paused. " Get up !" he said in a louder tone

" Get up !" the civilian snarled in Polish, at once assuming the rôle of interpreter. From now on he repeated every command the officer gave. Marek complied neither too readily nor too slowly.

" Go over to that wall ! . . . Stop ! Not that way ! Facing us."

When, rather surprised at this order, he turned round (he had faced the wall as a matter of course, he had done it

so often during the last twenty-four hours) he noticed that the door to the next room had been opened a little. "But perhaps it was open when I came in?"

He stood thus for some time; the door remained slightly open. He noticed that the civilian leaned across to the Gestapo officer and whispered something vehemently. He felt like a patient whose case is being decided in private consultation: "an operation, injection, or perhaps euthanasia," he thought with a touch of macabre humour.

The door was closed quietly.

"Enough!" the officer said, and beckoned with his whip to the two junior Gestapo-men.

Marek at once experienced their routine methods: several tugs, the sound of a spring snapping, a cold pressure on his sore wrists. Then a couple of shoves to give him his direction, and he was standing in the middle of the room, his hands fettered behind him.

"Now we're for it!" he thought, instinctively drawing his head down. He was wrong. He was only pushed towards the door which had just been closed. One of his guards opened it again; when he had passed through it was closed behind him.

He found himself in a large office, dimly lit by a single lamp on a desk. Absolutely silent, completely empty. No one in here at all?

As he grew accustomed to the darkness beyond the circle of light, in the depths of the room, against a dark portière, he saw someone, a vague outline. After a moment his eyes defined it as the slender form of a woman! Impossible!

She was standing by a window with her back to him. An elegant contrast to the office furniture, a softly outlined silhouette; as amazing as Chopin himself, here, in the Gestapo headquarters.

The woman turned sharply and walked across to the desk. Marek caught sight of her hands on the polished veneer of the desk, in the circle of bright light. Beautiful hands, and,

surely, familiar? He raised his eyes, and recognized her.

"You're surprised to see me here," she said, sitting down completely self-possessed. "Please sit down," she added, pointing to a comfortable arm-chair on the other side of the desk.

He did not move. He stared at that face, the face to which he had shown mercy, then, after some time, lowered his eyes. He was oppressed by a feeling of defeat: "So after all . . . after all . . ." he was thinking. And once more the words came to mind: "errare humanum est." Only it was not they, the judges, but he who had committed the error; a stupid error of the heart.

"Please do sit down," she repeated, smiling. "This is not an investigation, I have simply asked Weisendorff to let me have a talk with you. Major Weisendorff, who is handling your case. I knew him before the war: he isn't at all a bad fellow, I assure you,"

Marek sat down, or rather dropped into the chair, crushing his fettered hands with his own back. The shadow of the desk concealed the lower part of his body, but the pale face with the marks left by the 'not at all bad fellow' came within the circle of light.

Maria Krynska looked at him with wide, friendly eyes, anxiously, with a feminine, almost motherly tenderness.

"Mr. Marek," she said at last; then, noticing the vigilant expression of his tightly compressed lips, she added: "That's only between you and me, to those in there you're still Jan Kaminski, or, to be exact, a question mark. You see, they don't believe that very ordinary name is really yours. But they won't find out even your Christian name from me, and I don't know your surname - you wouldn't tell it to me that day in my apartment"

He remained obstinately silent. On the whole he had already collected his thoughts: whatever she was after, he had no intention of making her task easier. His crushed

wrists and twisted arms oppressed him with dull pain, quickened him into vigilance. His brain was functioning efficiently, stimulated by shortage of food.

"I'd swear I know what you're thinking now, what you're regretting now. But quite unjustly, Mr. Marek. It really was a mistake."

She picked up a crystal box of cigarettes, opened it, and pushed it across the desk to him. She set an empty ash-tray beside it.

"Oh, do forgive me," she said as she noticed that he kept his hands behind him. "Wait, I'll manage that for you."

She rose, walked round the desk and sat down on his chair-arm, enveloping him first in a cloud of perfume, then in the scent of the excellent cigarette she put in his mouth. She gripped the chair-back with her right hand and gave him the cigarette with her left, as though feeding a little child. He drew in the smoke avidly.

From time to time a haze of smoke passed over her face as he looked up at it from below. He could see it quite clearly, yet it seemed mysterious in the pleasant semi-darkness: and her white hand holding a cigarette, her bare arm—a composition beautiful and dangerous, something perfect in itself.

He leaned his head against the back of the chair; with his eyes he sought for the truth, for the way he should take, or at least the direction. "Who is this extraordinary woman? A friend? A demon? An enemy?" She was so close to him that at times he felt her breath. He did not repel her with his eyes, but he did not dare to be too bold: "Let *her* drop the mask, let *her* talk."

She talked. The words and the sentences were interspersed with silences, even more eloquent, more vivid, than speech. Brief silences sometimes, like pauses to take breath; but usually long silences, extended in meditation, or maybe calculation . . . Her right hand, half reluctantly, slipped from

the chair-back and rested on his shoulder with a warm, gentle touch.

"I didn't tell you everything that day," she began, when he had finished his cigarette. "I didn't have the opportunity. It's perfectly true the sentence was a judicial error, it's perfectly true that I worked for the Prot group, which however was not recognized—though I didn't know that until you told me—by the Polish central authorities and the London Government. Prot was a colleague of my husband; he had contacts with Germans even before the war; comradely contacts, club contacts . . . and more intimate ones. I should imagine he, too, worked for M.I. It wasn't his fault that some of his people betrayed his confidence: he himself was beyond all suspicion. In any case at one time, certainly in April 1940, when he ordered me to make contacts in the Gestapo, his organization was functioning irreproachably; and then it was affiliated to the central organization, and specialized in offensive M.I."

Marek listened very closely. He knew a little about the half legendary Prot, who had been killed by the Germans in 1942, during the mass executions of that year. Concentrating all his will, he assembled the fragmentary details known to him and compared them with this woman's story. So far there was no hiatus or contradiction: the result was a logical picture, bearing every mark of probability; the various scraps which she revealed fitted into one another and into the fragments he knew. It could all be the truth—or else a magnificent piece of duplicity, a crowning achievement of a specialist in double-dealing.

"Quite possibly you don't believe me," she ended; she had seated herself in another arm-chair, bringing it close to his. Now, five or six cigarette-ends were lying in the ashtray. "I cannot compel you to believe, belief is irrational. And besides, I'm not concerned with that—that isn't the reason why I've overcome certain difficulties and managed to

arrange to see you."

"Then what is the reason?" he asked. His head was confused and troubled. A kaleidoscopic vision of facts, admissions, and unexpressed reservations whirled before his mental sight. But the confusion was not unpleasant; it was mingled with an unforgettable perfume, with the light brush of a palm over his burning lips, with the touch of knees beneath black silk.

"I want to pay a debt," she said, drawing away. "The only debt I have contracted in all my life."

She gazed at him now almost coldly, practically, though her voice had deepened to a more passionate note.

"As you see, my dear boy, I've had a very interesting life. I've enjoyed myself. Sometimes I was prudent, more often I've behaved like a lunatic. Yes, I've enjoyed myself marvellously; after all, life is a theatre, and the human beings—men and women, acquaintances, admirers—are actors, comedians, or even sometimes chessmen, which I set out as I wish, or remove from the board. I've lived a full life, I could enjoy myself without trouble, for I was dependent only on myself, I had nothing to thank anyone for. I had debtors, but I had no creditors. Only you . . . that day . . ."

She drew back into her chair and stared at him with glittering eyes—vacant, or deep with mystery; glittering with passion, or only pride?

"I'm very glad I was here when you came; I may be able to help you, I may be able to pay the debt, to cancel out that other act.

"Oh, please don't speak yet," she said in a loud whisper as Marek went tense and started up. "It's not going to be very easy. My possibilities are restricted, they're very, very small. There can be no question of your being officially released; you know that well enough. That's impossible. I must have your co-operation."

"And what sort of co-operation are you thinking of?" he

asked circumspectly.

"I know Weisendorff well, and I know others here. I can find out when you're sent to Pawiak prison, I can pass on the information a day, or possibly even two days earlier. You've got friends . . . cases have been known of prisoners being rescued . . ."

"Friends . . . friends . . . friends . . ." the word hammered into his mind, sobering him as though with a douche of cold water. "So that's the idea, my dear Mrs. Krynska!" he thought.

"I'm not interested in that method," he said very emphatically, keeping his eyes turned from her. "Herr Weisendorff also wanted to know my friends' names; and you can see the traces of the 'friendly' conversation we had. I didn't tell him any names: I've got a bad memory.

"Besides," he added after a brief pause, looking hard at her, "you really do exaggerate the extent of that debt and your own gratitude. I'm not a creditor; you owe me nothing. It's I who am in debt. It's I who must repay my superiors and myself. And I shall repay to the full . . . you can be sure of that."

She sat a long time silent. She seemed to shrink into her chair, to grow smaller. Her eyes faded, she let her lids droop over them. She looked almost as though she had fallen asleep in the comfortable chair. To Marek—against all logic—she seemed wretched, abandoned, defenceless: almost as she had been that day when he had carried her into the bedroom. He felt very tired, broken shattered. The bones of his wrists were conscious with pain.

"I think we've had enough of this," he said roughly. "I want to go back to the cell."

He let his head sink on his chest, and closed his eyes; he really was tired. But now it wouldn't be long before he was back with the 'Ape'.

"Child!" he heard her voice above him, in a gently

reproachful and apparently an imploring tone. She was standing over him, she bent down till her face almost touched his. She put her hands on his shoulders.

"Child!" she said again. "You don't understand a thing. You've got it all wrong. I want to be your debtor, I want to take on a fresh debt. I put my trust in your twenty years . . ."

"Excuse me," he said very frowsily, as he felt her fingers stroking his head; "I'm twenty-two. I'm a lieutenant in the infantry."

"Oh, do forgive me! I had no intention of insulting you." She straightened up and gazed at his blue and swollen face: anxiously, like a mother; ardently, like a lover.

"Don't you see that really I'm envious of you? You will die like a hero, they will write about you. You may be proud of yourself, and they of you. But I? What will happen to me?" she spoke in a quiet, quivering voice. "You know my fate: contempt, infamy, ostracism. Even here, even in fetters, you are a hundred times richer than I . . . you can afford to bestow your favour on me."

He gazed at her from under eyelids quivering with weariness. Was he already asleep, or was it all a waking dream? Who was this woman talking to him? His mother . . . sister . . . lover? A converted sinner, or a perfidious agent? No, not that . . . surely a converted sinner: how could he doubt the sincerity of that haunting voice, how question the truth in those eyes glittering as they gazed at him?

"After all that had happened," she said in a burning whisper, "there was nothing else I could do. I wanted to live; after all, I'm young too. Only they . . . only these people here could give me any protection after your stupid sentence." She lowered her voice. "But I want to come back, I want to work with you. In saving you I shall save myself, my better self, the Polish officer's wife. Don't

you see that, Marek ? Don't you understand at last ?"

She shook him violently with both her hands gripping his benumbed shoulders.

9

SHE PAID for her coffee, sat idly until the waiter was attending other customers, then wrote, or rather sketched, printed letters on a sheet of white paper :

" I HAVE NEWS OF MAREK. THERE ARE
POSSIBILITIES. TOMORROW, JUNE 15, I
SHALL BE WAITING IN THE CHURCH IN
MONIUSZKO STREET FROM THREE TO FOUR
P.M. I SHALL HAVE A LARGE CATHOLIC
BREVIARY WITH A PICTURE OF ST. THERESA."

She folded the paper and put it in a plain commercial envelope. For a moment she hesitated. " It must look quite ordinary." In distinct, straightforward script, writing as though for an exhibition of calligraphy, she addressed the envelope : ' For Mr. Gabriel '.

Well, that was the lot, surely. She was about to put the letter in her pocket when it occurred to her that after all, the matter was too serious to be treated so casually. In one corner of the envelope she added a few words, heavily underlining them. Out of habit she raised the envelope to her lips to lick the gum and seal it down, but remembered the strict instruction : ' the envelope must be open '.

The ' post-box ' was not far away. She entered a small toy-shop. All the spirit of commerce had long since evaporated from the place, leaving only the vague reminiscent odour of fairy stories, Christmas trees, a child's room filled with plush

mice. There seemed to be no one in the shop. But after coughing once or twice and looking about her more closely she noticed an old woman in one corner. She was grey-haired, and her hair was very clean, as though it had only just been washed. Evidently she had been having a pleasant doze, for her faded eyes blinked rather absently in her furrowed, amiable face.

"Good morning," Maria said in a low, friendly tone. "I have a letter for a Mr. Gabriel. May I leave it?"

"Gabri-el . . . Gabri-el . . ." the old woman repeated, blinking even faster. "I don't know any Gabri-el . . ." She was silent for a moment or two, clearly trying to recall the faces of various people she knew. "Is he a man with a small beard, and a black cravat? An elderly gentleman, very nice too; he buys toys for his little niece sometimes."

"I don't know what he looks like. I was simply asked to leave this letter." She handed it over the counter.

The old woman put on her spectacles and looked at the envelope very intently, as though the inscription might help her to identify the addressee.

"'For Mr. Gabri-el'," she read slowly. "'Very urgent, deliver immediately'. Dear, dear, my good lady, urgent too!"

She looked at Maria helplessly, then:

"Melcia," she called, turning her head to a doorway that evidently led to a back parlour. "Melcia, come here a minute."

Maria automatically looked at the doorway, and for a second had difficulty in restraining a smile. She saw an exact copy of the old woman behind the counter, a double produced on the spot: just as clean, in an identical dark grey dress with jabots, and with the same blinking, kindly eyes. She, too, had spectacles on her nose.

"Melcia, my dear!" the first twin said. "Do you know a Mr. Gabri-el? This lady has brought a letter for him. Very urgent; really it is! It says so in one corner."

"Gabri-el . . . Gabri-el . . ." the second twin repeated with intense mental concentration. "D'you think it's the gentleman with whiskers ; you know, that rather good-looking, dark man ? He was here the day before yesterday with his little son, and bought a clown for three hundred zlotys. A very pleasant man he seemed to be."

"But, my dear, he couldn't have been Gabri-el," the first said reproachfully. "He had a monogram S.K. on his case ; I noticed it when he paid. He put his case down on the counter. Grannie Salomea has got one just like it. And besides, it wasn't his son ; he called the boy 'nephew'. Melcia, Melcia, how could you have forgotten !"

Maria Krynska stood between the two sisters, enclosed in an extraordinary circle of a couple of hundred years of life : each of these two old ladies must have been in their seventies, and if their 'grannie' was still alive she must be at least 130. This thought rather tickled her, but she was more concerned for the fate of the letter lying on the counter.

"What about the letter then ?" she asked. "May I leave it ?"

The first woman exchanged glances with her twin.

"Well, all right ; you can leave it. Few people come into our shop these days, very few, lady. But it's always possible that someone named Gabri-el may turn up. The letter doesn't have to be fed, it can lie on the counter . . . But perhaps Gabri-el's a surname, what do you think ?" she suddenly asked, revealing signs of great interest. "People have such strange surnames these days. Though even in the old days, I remember . . ."

"I really don't know," Maria interrupted. "Good-bye, and thank you very much."

Gabriel felt rather foolish in the extraordinary situation in which he was placed. It was true that Father Jan, who had thought of the idea, had assured him that it was quite all

right. "The confessional is not the sacrament," he said, "it's only a piece of church furniture. You won't be pretending to be a father confessor yourself." But all the same . . .

He involuntarily put his hand in his pocket, intending to soothe his nerves with a cigarette. But he remembered where he was, and drew his hand back as though burnt. "That would have mucked everything up; may all the dev . . ." He bit his tongue: cursing was not in keeping with his present rôle. He wondered whether he ought to cross himself, or perhaps say a Paternoster; but he quickly dropped the idea: he couldn't stand hypocrisy.

He impatiently made himself more comfortable in the dark and narrow box of the confessional. He was a little unnerved by the silence—which was perfectly in keeping with the place and the time of day—he was annoyed by the wooden bench with its sharp edge, and the really rather comfortable cushion, which he had pushed away as he sat down. He was irritated by the strange smell in that strange cubicle: the smell of dirty stockings, of not too clean linen . . . of sin?

The clock below creaked away in its aged voice, coughed a little, then struck the time: a quarter to four. Again silence fell, mysterious and very deep, broken only by some elusive sputter: perhaps from the candles at the high altar, or the oil lamp before the Host. Or perhaps he only imagined it: how could he hear a candle sputtering a good fifteen yards away?

Gabriel was not religious. He never went to confession; his marriage affairs were rather involved. He did not like priests, though he admitted exceptions; he came of a Catholic, almost a clerical family. His parents' home had been an open house for the 'men in black': Jews in his father's office, dealing in milk, grain and horses; priests in the sitting-room, in connection with marriages and funerals, christenings, games of preference and family celebrations, doubly solemnized

by their presence. One of these old acquaintances had come in useful this very day.

"How many hours does a priest sit in the confessional?" he wondered for the first time, with a touch of respect. "And what rot they have to listen to!" He recalled the queues of withered devotees he had seen hurrying to confession on the rare occasions of his visits to church. "A poor sort of job!" he concluded.

He preferred his military profession. Everything was clear and simple, circumscribed by orders, by reports on the execution of orders. Attack, defence, a clean fight. But was it always? He was suddenly gnawed by doubt, and was amazed he had never thought of that before. It must be the place and time . . .

The main entrance door creaked; he heard single footsteps in the nave. He drew the curtain aside a little, but could see nothing except the balustrade of the gallery. The footsteps halted: presumably the new arrival had taken a seat on one of the benches.

Gabriel closed his eyes. He was tired. He had been tired for four years without a break. Action, action, action: one thing after another, without pause, without rest. Contacts, reports, orders to be carried out, some military operation to be performed, death sentences to be executed, very many of them: stupid, boring work. Nights spent in all sorts of holes, and always short, never certain, sometimes disturbed by an alarm. Never any silence, or peace. And never any thought—he surprised himself with this sudden discovery: "no, hardly any thought."

Only now, in here, at this strange, dead hour. In a silence that absorbed everything. Time for meditation; almost anxiety; but different somehow, unknown before.

"Does the priest awaiting the penitent feel all this too?" he wondered, his mind diverted from its normal, secure and solitary course. He sluggishly began to reflect on the feelings

of the confessor, and of those who knelt down outside the grille. Memories from his childhood, from his youthful days surged into his mind : the formulae of the catechism, words he had not uttered for years ; the accounting of conscience . . . confession . . . remorse for sin . . .

His mind turned to recalling the ten commandments. He went wrong, and had to start from the beginning : the first, the second, third . . . fourth . . . He stumbled over the fifth (he remembered the sixth only too well). The fifth . . . fifth . . . his mind repeated persistently, developing a sporting interest in the question as though it were part of a crossword puzzle. " The fifth . . . how does the fifth go ?"

" A perfectly idiotic idea !" a man of uncertain age was thinking as he hurriedly entered the church and took a stout book out of his pocket. He had had some difficult contacts in his time : in pubs, in parks, in cinemas and cabarets. But in a place like this ! " Oh, damn the whole business !"

He walked with a fairly sure step to the middle of the nave : he had had a good dinner and several stiff vodkas. He was put out by the silence and solitude ; there seemed to be no one else in the church. He stopped and looked about him. An old woman emerged from one corner and went to the entrance. On the front pew were two elderly ladies, but they were not waiting for him. He stood for a time uncertainly, not knowing what to do next.

" I suppose I ought to kneel down," he decided at last. He perfunctorily bent his right knee, then sat down in the third pew, ostentatiously setting his breviary open on the shelf in front of him. He took a picture of St. Theresa out of the book and laid it on top. Then he waited, with difficulty controlling a hiccup. (Hell, that caviare again !)

A priest in a surplice came out of the sacristy. He knelt before the high altar and prayed. He rose and walked down the nave, presumably to go to a confessional. He halted

by the first pew and looked at the women ; one had a rosary in her hands, the other sat with her face hidden in her palms. He passed the next pew. Then his eyes, meditative yet bold, rested on the stranger, and shifted to his book. He came closer, and their eyes met.

" I think you've come to confession," he said quietly. " Please follow me."

The stranger started back in annoyance. A curse came to his lips, he was on the point of making some idiotic retort. Just in time he saw the priest rest his hand significantly on the breviary and coloured picture.

" Hm . . . hm . . . Really . . . " he muttered indistinctly ; but he rose. He followed the priest, who led him out and through a twilit corridor, then up dark steps. When they reached the gallery, which was better lighted, the man took a stealthy glance at the priest : he registered him, gripped him with a professional eye. He never forgot a face.

They reached the corner where the confessional stood.

" Please kneel down, and speak ," the priest pointed to the kneeling-stool below the grille.

The man hesitated, obviously taken by surprise.

" What's the idea ? But you . . . " he stammered.

" This is nothing to do with me , you asked for someone else. He's been waiting half an hour . . . "

The priest turned an' walked away. The stranger awkwardly knelt down on the narrow strip of wood. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

" What have you come for, and whom are you from ?" he heard a muffled, yet surely familiar voice. He stared through the grille. Darkness ; no one to be seen, not even the gleam of eyes. He was silent.

" Please speak freely, in a whisper," Gabriel said. He, too, was unable to see the other man's face : the sunlight did not reach that corner. He deliberately spoke in deep tones : he could change his voice a little, and this gift had been of use

in many meetings and telephone talks.

"Who have I the pleasure of talking to?" the man said into space, through the grille.

"That is of no importance; it was you who asked for a meeting in order to talk about Marek."

"Yes, that's right." (The voice sounded familiar to Gabriel. "I've heard it somewhere, I'm sure, but where, and when?" He gazed through the grille, but saw only a blur, an anonymous patch . . .) "That's right; I've been asked . . . I have certain acquaintances . . ." The man chose his words carefully, he did not feel very sure of himself. A ray of sunlight had fallen across the 'church furniture'; now it was slipping over the confessional wall opposite the heavy grille.

"Various circumstances bring me into contact with Major Weisendorff," Gabriel heard after a brief pause. "You . . . I mean to say, Father . . . your people . . ." he corrected himself, "must know the name. He has been sentenced by your court. And he is in charge of Marek's case. It's a hopeless case: he was caught red-handed on a very serious job. But Weisendorff . . ."

The whisper died away. Gabriel was almost sure of the situation now. Weisendorff: of course he knew the name; he had read the documents relating to the German's case. He himself had been entrusted with the execution of the sentence a month or so before. More than one attempt had been made to carry it out, but the German had had exceptional luck; and moreover he took every precaution. "Well, well," Gabriel thought, "if even he is beginning to cringe . . ." He made no comment; now he was anxious to prolong the conversation: he, too, had noticed the ray of sunlight slipping slowly over the boards of the confessional. Before long it would fall on that face.

"Well, and what then?" he asked at last. "What are you driving at?"

"Weisendorff is taking a risk ; he dragged the case out, though the young man's obstinate, he isn't supplying any information."

"What state is he in ?" Gabriel asked only in order to gain time. He knew now what was coming, and was prepared for it.

"Oh, not at all bad," the voice said. "He got knocked about a bit by the gendarmes who captured him. But since then he's been treated well ; he's quite able to walk. Weisendorff is trying very hard. And now . . ."

The man began to expand and grow loquacious. He had regained his usual self-confidence, he had forgotten the sunny day, the brilliant ray wandering down the wall of the box. Gabriel listened and watched.

"More to the point, more to the point, please!" he suddenly interrupted the garrulous flow. The sunlight was caressing the long head outside the grille, and now he knew. "What are you asking for Marek's release ?"

"Cancellation of the death sentence on Weisendorff," the man said after a pause, as though he were collecting his breath. "250,000 zlotys for expenses : you realize they'll be pretty heavy. The release has got to be covered up ; four others will have to know about it . . . possibly five."

"Is that all ?" the voice asked coldly.

"Almost, almost . . ." he began to stammer, put out by the obvious change in tone of the man in the confessional. There would be one other item, very useful to your people and not without significance for me personally. Speaking candidly, I've got important connections in certain quarters, and I can do a great deal. I've already managed quite a lot. I'm a Pole, I've never worked against the Underground. On the contrary, I've carried through some very important tasks. I expect you've heard of the release of Wasiak . . . Klos . . . Kalinowski ?"

"What then ?" Gabriel's question, uttered in an in-

different undertone, was taken as encouragement.

"Of course, these things cost a bit," the man said with returning self-confidence. "I don't need to tell you that this sort of thing depends on bribing the Germans. I'm only a middle-man . . . an honest middle-man," he grew enthusiastic ; "a man of ideals. I earn only enough to keep myself alive. My living expenses are less than those of many an officer in the Home Army or the People's Army. But for the good of the cause I'd like to make regular contact with you, if . . ."

"Good, good !" Gabriel interrupted him. "We'll come back to that later. First I'll deal with your previous points. listen ! There can be no question of cancelling the sentence. Formally it's quite impossible : it was passed in full accordance with the law. But even if the lawyers could find some legalistic quibble, I'd be against it for tactical reasons. Weisendorff is only one, but we've got thousands of Mareks. Besides, Weisendorff is still at his post, and in a fortnight or so he'll have done enough to earn a fresh sentence."

"Oh, if that's what you're thinking, you're wrong," the man interposed. "I assure you he's a changed man ; he's giving proofs of his goodwill. I'm in a position to state that he may be of service in more difficult circumstances."

"We shall see !" Gabriel said. "We could suspend the sentence for three months, say, and then . . ." he paused. "After that it would depend on him : it might be further postponed. As for the financial aspect : my dear sir, you've rather overdone it, don't you think ? You can't have a quarter of million just for one talk with me ; and Weisendorff doesn't need ready cash. I'll give 150,000 zlotys : that's the usual rate for the man's rank and the given circumstances."

"But don't you see . . ." the voice outside the grille, still self-assured and insistent, tried to expostulate.

"One moment, one moment !" Gabriel said slowly and emphatically, though rather more quietly. "Please wait till I've finished."

Unseen and unrecognised, for a few seconds he gazed through the grille at the other man's face, which was drawn back a little and was perfectly lighted by the slanting sunlight.

"I reject your third proposal, Mr. Zielski," he said very distinctly, with emphasis on the name.

The agent shrank, drew his face back hurriedly, and hid it in shadow. He made as though to rise, or perhaps to draw aside the curtain of the grille. He gave it up: evidently he heard footsteps, or noticed a woman approaching.

The silence put an end to the negotiations. An old woman coming from the direction of the choir glanced at the 'penitent'; he was kneeling humbly, his hands clutching his head, as though awaiting absolution.

"Good!" he said at last, putting his lips close to the hateful grille. "I agree. Marek will be released on the second day after the document, signed and sealed, is received at Weisendorff's address."

"And the money?"

"I'll call for it myself."

"Oh no; we'll send it to you. What address?"

"Alfred Jesionka, No. 51 Krucza Street."

He started up and made swiftly for the gallery door.

The devout old woman was highly astonished to see that he did not kiss the priest's stole or hand. "Perhaps he wasn't granted absolution," she thought with a touch of concern.

When the car turned left out of Morszalkowska Street into Novogrodka Street Marek felt his stomach rise into his mouth, as if he were in a lift stopping suddenly after a swift descent. There was something fishy about this ride; many of the details were contrary to routine: a private Adler car instead of the prison van, an officer as escort, no handcuffs on the prisoner's wrists. And the time of day too: late evening, it was almost completely dark. And then, the unusual route

they were taking, quite the wrong direction for the Pawiak prison.

They sped past the Telecommunications Office, past the Agricultural Bank. A long-distance tram jammed on its brakes, swept the car with the antennae of its feeble lights, and was left behind. Now the Pomological Gardens lay asleep on their left, laden with a wealth of ripening apples, nestling in the scent of raspberries.

"Left!" the Gestapo-officer sitting beside Marek ordered the driver.

They turned into Chalubinski Street, speeding continually farther from the city centre. Where on earth were they going? And why? There was nothing—no government office, no occupying authorities—in this direction. He caught himself yawning. He knew it was due to anxiety, he was afraid of an attack of funk. "Steady! Steady!" he told himself. He licked his dry lips.

He had good reason for anxiety: the position was uncertain, to say the least. Over a week had passed since his conversation with Maria Krynska: a week tense but colourless; not disturbed by any questionings; filled with thoughts, surmises, calculations. His talks with the 'Ape' had ended when the gangster was taken for his last ride. He had been left alone, in complete isolation. The food was tolerable. He slept well, and physically returned to normal. But what now?

He choked back an involuntary yawn. He concentrated all his thoughts in the attempt to divine the enemy's intentions and to seize an opportunity for action. His eyes vigilantly registered the position of the speeding car, his ears were ready to catch every word that came from his escort; his psychic scent sniffed for the wind of event; his hands were longing for struggle, his legs were ready for flight.

For the time being, nothing . . . nothing. Only a certain physical contact gave him warning from time to time, when the pistol holster of the officer beside him pressed against

his thigh. Its owner was silent. As he put a lighter to a cigarette the flame lit up the man's impassive features. In front, the shoulders of the driver and the gendarme beside him barred Korda off from the world and freedom just as surely as the speed of the car.

The driver slowed down. A No. 11 tram, a phantom glowing phosphorescently with the squares of its blue windows, passed them with an impatient jangling of the bell. Along the sidewalks slipped the shadows of pedestrians poised on the beams of downward-pointing flashlamps. For the rest, Warsaw was in darkness: uneasy, vigilant, lurking in the alert of A.A. batteries, sound-detectors and searchlights.

"Why not now?" the thought flashed into his mind. "Snatch the pistol out of the officer's holster, smash it down on his head, and leap out while the car is moving slowly." A jerk in front; they passed another street and accelerated again to 40 miles an hour. Too late now.

"Halt!" the officer at Marek's side unexpectedly commanded. The brakes went on, the car stopped: in a wilderness, an undeveloped section of the Avenue of Independence, miles from anywhere! Marek's heart also stopped, for perhaps a couple of seconds. He tensed himself for a spring, but the officer reached across him for the door handle.

"Get out!" he snarled, opening the door.

Korda automatically drew back, huddled deeper into the cushion. Now he knew: "Shot while attempting to escape." No, he wouldn't let that happen: if he was to die, he'd die fighting. He stretched out his right hand to seize the pistol, but the Gestapo-man forestalled him: he already held it in his hand. He jabbed Marek with the barrel:

"Raus, du Schweinhund," he repeated more quietly. "You're free."

Korda started up. He bowed his head, intending to butt the man. But he was not given the chance: strong hands seized

him by the legs and dragged him out of the car as if he were a bag of sawdust. The gendarme who had been guarding the driver neatly carried out his officer's order, adding several kicks on his own account.

"Finish!" Marek thought, and closed his eyes. Afterwards he could never recall whether he felt any fear as he lay in the road, waiting for the shot that would shatter his head.

No shot, but a slam, two successive slams : doors shut almost simultaneously. Then a roar, almost angry, from the car engine ; the Adler shot off. When he raised his head the small red rearlight was vanishing in the darkness. He was alone, quite alone ; free, on the empty road.

He got up and shook himself. The consciousness of a great achievement came over him slowly out of the nameless darkness. What he felt was not yet joy ; it certainly was not triumph. At first he felt it simply as relief, release from a burden, from the excessive pressure of events.

Ahead of him twinkled specks of light. He went straight towards them, not thinking where he was going or why. Only with the rhythmic sound of his steps did he come to think of an address, a direction to take and even more : a goal greatly desired. A face and a perfume drew him, like tow-lines : to that face he owed his freedom, and, of less importance, his life.

He did not take long to reach the lonely suburb in which, as she had told him, her villa was situated. He knew the address by heart : Rozana Street, the number and the name. Now he was standing at the gate, outside a silhouette of young lilac, a clipped hedge.

He resolutely opened the gate ; his feet crunched lightly over the gravel ; two steps up to the front door. He did not ring, he tried the handle : it yielded without resistance. He found himself in an excellently furnished hall. "Good !" he thought ; "I'll take her by surprise."

He stole over the heavy carpet and glanced through a half-open door into a room on the right. She was sitting at a

desk, in the light of a table lamp, lost in thought, writing with a pen on a sheet of paper. To the right of her was a large divan bed, made up for the night—possibly for two people—in a seductive twilight. Beyond were a wardrobe, two or three smaller pieces of furniture, and a window ; a very wide window, with a sweep of curtain.

Marek held his breath, to avoid disturbing the picture. He absorbed the perfume, and the face, and the hand writing on the paper : that hand of all hands most beautiful, most greatly to be desired.

She took something out of a drawer and wrapped it, together with the note, in a silk handkerchief lying on the desk. When she stood up he drew back a pace. Unobserved, he watched as she pushed the bundle under the left-hand pillow of the divan. He waited for a moment, then he knocked.

She ran to meet him with arms opened wide.

No words passed between them : lips united by a single breath do not speak. Their eyes were closed with delight, with yearning ; their nostrils drew in the scent of their bodies ; they were moved by the need for union, exclusive of all else, confined solely within their embrace.

Marek's head was swimming even before he touched a glass. The glasses were already waiting for them—filled with French wine, and accompanied by hors d'œuvres—on the table in the dining room. Kolda demanded vodka. He drank in Maria with his eyes as her slender figure in its short summer dress vanished into the kitchen, to reappear within reach of his arms. She slipped away from his greedy hands.

"Don't get in the way, you'll spill the glasses !" she admonished him with a smile, never before had he seen such a smile on her face.

Today, in this joyous mood, she seemed different : fuller, more feminine, ardent and motherly at once. She had already taken possession of him with the caress of her glittering eyes. He was a little afraid of those eyes : they shone with a new

light, with something he had never experienced in any previous love affair, not even in love. He was afraid of, yet he desired those glances : mature, tropically burning.

They did not talk much. Very feeble are words and sentences when passion is playing with the breath, rising in the throat, demanding fulfilment, absolute unity. Rapture delights in silence. Sleep comes after satiation.

He was the first to awaken. A ray of the summer sun pierced through a chink in the shutter. Filtered through the sieve of the curtain, yet strong and youthful, it lay across the divan, caressed the white arm extended towards him in an unconscious gesture of tenderness, imbued the bare breast with the honey of golden light.

He was afraid to move for fear of disturbing the ray, the silence, the beautiful hand touching his body. Only when she drew her hand back—she was not awake, but moved by some drowsy impulse—did he remember something. He felt under his pillow. He carefully unwrapped the silk bundle. He felt the caress of steel in his fingers.

The Walter 7.65, his own pistol, lost in the street battle, showed up black against the white sheet, not clashing, but staining the picture ; strong, masculine, rapacious. He read the words written on the paper : ' To Marek : a return of part of the debt, a pledge of our community of spirit. Maria '.

He stroked the weapon. Only now did he realize all the goodness of fate. He had all he wanted. He was happy.

IO

THE GRAIN which Obergruppenfuhrer Riesel scattered in the Gestapo headquarters fell on good soil. Vogel, the Abwehr

commander, made no further objection to the use of the Wehrmacht ; on the contrary, even Luftwaffe formations were thrown into the task. Party comrade Hahn worked swiftly, Kempinsky did not spare his energy. Plans long drawn up were put into operation. The Germans fished continually with hook and line, bait was set, and nets were cast for the bigger fish. Weisendorff, Roth and Ludwig all had plenty to do. But most of all, great nets of terror were cast over Warsaw.

Mass round-ups became the rule, public executions a normal spectacle. Where the first victims fell, there the first flowers were scattered on the bloodstained road ; the first inscriptions : ' Glory to the fallen ! ' were secretly written. Polish blood was shed against the walls of the former German Embassy ; and again there were flowers, lighted candles, and the words ' Glory, glory ! ' hurriedly written in chalk. Then came the slaughter of the workers and tramway-men in Mlynarska suburb—' Glory, glory, glory ! ' But after that ? Who can count, who can remember and report ?

Yet someone counted, someone remembered. Teeth were grated, fists clenched. The weaker grew faint ; the bold hearts beat more strongly. And of bold hearts there was no lack : if they were to perish, let it be in struggle.

Acts of vengeance followed swiftly : the race of blood was begun. Hatred, crime—vengeance, punishment, and again hatred—stronger, ever stronger, corroding the executioners' powers of reason, even the victims' fear ; destroying all sensitivity and sympathy. The deadly harvest was reaped throughout the city uninterruptedly, incessantly. By day, patrols in the streets : gendarmes, Wehrmacht, airmen, a living net with fine reticulations. Clattering boots, roaring megaphones, shots, salvoes, occasionally a cry, more often mute silence : mighty, clamant to heaven. On the walls, the red placards announcing further executions carried out. By night, the howl of air raid warnings : aeroplanes coming

from the East, bringing a new fruit, bombs mutilating the city ; blows that many longed for, that many wept over, and many cursed.

Losses, losses : gaps, breaches in the ranks. Volunteers continually reporting for service : ' Give us arms, we want to fight ! ' Contacts broken, new contacts made ; advances, adjustments ; a mighty attempt to build up an underground army.

All these things passed through Gabriel's mind as he waited in the timber-yard ; he had asked Marek to report to him.

The young man was late in arriving. He hurried, panting, into the office. This was not the old Marek, he was smiling ; his eyes had lost their hard glint. He expected a reprimand for being late, this time he would be grilled. But his commander only glanced at his watch significantly.

" You managed it, then ? " he said, shaking Korda's hand. He looked at him closely, with a touch of anxiety : as a master-craftsman turns over a favourite instrument in his hand before starting work.

" They knocked you about a bit," he added. " But not so much, I see."

" I was able to stick it ; I had extraordinary luck. Did you give a lot for me ? "

" Oh, nothing much ; we managed to beat them down. Take a seat. Got anything to smoke ? "

Marek hesitated a moment before feeling in his pocket.

" Aha ! " Gabriel remarked. " German. ' Korso ' brand," he read the name.

" I had them given to me," Marek stammered, not looking at his superior officer. He sat down opposite Gabriel, at the desk littered with commercial correspondence. He abstractedly picked up a pencil and began to doodle with it.

Gabriel watched him, observing, noting. " They've changed the lad somehow," he thought. He paused a moment,

then said :

" Well ?" He put the cigarette in his mouth and touched the tip with the end of his finger.

" Oh, I'm sorry !" Marek realized what was required of him. He gave Gabriel a light, and lit a cigarette for himself. He put down the pencil and concentrated his thoughts, looking at his commander less absently. Gabriel took a couple of draws.

" Your conduct has been exemplary," he began. He spoke slowly, with pauses. " Changes are being made in the squad. There have been losses. No, not among our men," he added, as Korda fidgeted anxiously. " All's well so far as we're concerned. Only Brutus got a damaged hand, and that not seriously. But there have been losses higher up. Important changes have been made. I've been advanced. And as for you . . . "

He broke off, to produce a greater effect. Marek was doodling again with the pencil. He looked up only after a moment or two. Gabriel noticed a hint of interest in his eyes.

" As for you," he repeated, looking at him fixedly, " it's been decided that you're to take over my squad."

Marek made no comment. But at last he straightened up and put the pencil down.

" Thank you," he said, without enthusiasm. " That's a great honour for me, but . . . "

" But what ?" Gabriel was obviously dissatisfied.

" You see, I was going to ask for leave. Not for long : only two weeks." He showed more life now, and went on hurriedly ; clearly he attached great importance to achieving his object.

" After the weeks I've been working for ' Roza ', and after all that's happened, I'm entitled to a break. I haven't had a moment to myself for two years. And even then I spent all my leave on duty with a forest unit. I know things are difficult now, but if you . . . "

Gabriel made up his mind at once. Of course the lad was right. True, he hadn't expected this reaction, he relied on Marek. But it couldn't be helped : he was entitled to his whims after being in the hands of the Gestapo.

" Good !" he said. " I shall support your application. I think it'll be granted, if I can remain with the squad. You can take it over when you report for duty. Where am I to send Olga ?"

Marek gave the address : ' Rozana Street . . . ' Gabriel opened his book, a German one this time, turned down certain corners, and shut it again.

" I'll go out first," he said, rising and holding out his hand.

" There's one other thing ;" Korda held Gabriel's hand. " There's something else I want to ask."

" Out with it, but cut it short !"

" You see, there's a woman . . . "

" Ah, so that's it !" Gabriel rejoiced ; at last he had his bearings.

" She wants to work, and she'll be very useful. She's intelligent, quickwitted, and she's got lots of guts."

" Very good ! Let her join your squad : it's up to you now. I'll take Olga with me. Excellent !" He shook Marek's hand. " And have a gay time on leave, if it's granted. If it's refused I'll let you know tomorrow. Otherwise . . . Chin up, brother !"

Gabriel kept his word : Marek was granted leave.

Two weeks of delight : an instant, a century stolen from existence. In Rozana Street life foamed like champagne in a wilderness. The villa was isolated, discreet, without neighbours ; it was finely furnished, filled with flowers from the garden. And against that background a couple of lovers : a youth hungry, clumsy, masculinely aggressive and boyishly diffident ; and a mature beauty at the height of self-knowledge,

infallible in the art of love : bashful and unbridled ; prodigal with daring caresses, yet in a moment cold, suddenly alien, self-contained ; and at that moment, precisely at that moment, superb. But all around them, outside the windows, beyond the fence and the quickset hedge, Warsaw, Europe, a world in flames, burning with hatred and frenzy. An idyll on a gunpowder barrel.

The days were very fine, though sometimes muggy, heavy with storm. Marek barely kept count of them : intoxicated with the wine of the night, he slept till noon and longer. He had his breakfast in bed ; and then, as Maria frequently went out for some hours, he wandered about the perfumed rooms, talking to the daily woman who kept house for her. He played the piano, turned over French novels.

Maria's frequent expeditions annoyed him : she never told him where she went and why. When he asked, she put him in his place with one clear look : derisive, tender, yet sometimes severe, not to say contemptuous. She ended the discord with the seal of a kiss, with a sudden intimate nestling against him, an unexpected caress.

They were fond of the grey evenings. The dust of the twilight sifted through the windows, settled quietly in the corners, slowly enveloped the furniture, erased the pictures, and at last engulfed their faces. Only voices and embraces were left, and breaths, close to each other, almost a single breath.

Maria talked about the world, about books and pictures, about the theatre, not in the manner of a spectator, but as one who has experienced it all from behind the scenes. She brought with her the scent of Europe, the distant Europe that Marek knew only from desultory reading. Her deep, mezzo-soprano voice, stimulating and mysterious in the gathering dusk, created a vision of colourful Paris, vibrated with an echo of Italy, the chatter of frivolous Vienna or sunny Seville. Foreign words, sayings and exotic names, came naturally

to her lips.

Marek listened with his eyes closed. He absorbed the voice, the words, the cadence of the sentences, and the silences ; they fructified his imagination, expanded into swift or sluggish pictures, into melodies, human faces, the features of cities, monuments, unknown landscapes. Sometimes he aroused himself from the enchantment, snapped the film-strip with a sudden tug :

“ When were you in Paris ? Do you come from France ? ”

Silence, no answer. A feint of jesting words, then return to the interrupted theme. She never talked of herself. Nor did she ask him direct questions, she knew they could only give birth to lies, to pretence and insincerity. Never to ask, always to wait for the right moment, and listen : such were her rules of conduct. She could listen as well as she could talk. At the end of those two weeks she knew all about Marek. He knew hardly anything about her, though he would have been prepared to swear he knew her through and through.

He knew her body : the gift of the night. Surrendered sometimes secretly, under the fast-closed tent of the darkness ; more often openly, audaciously in the gleam of the rose-shaded lamp. He possessed her and drank of her : a potion amazingly strong, always with a different flavour, previously unknown, both stupefying and sobering ; food for the avid senses, incomprehensible to the mind. And she possessed him : she, the mistress of innumerable delights.

Sometimes he would wake up in the night. He would lie a long time listening to her breathing. “ So this is love ? ” he asked himself, asked the darkness. His heart responded with a quiver—of fear, or insatiety ? He did not know, probably to this day he still does not know what is meant by the Biblical phrase : ‘ the astonishment of the heart ’.

An unexpected ring disturbed the carefree day, to end the fervour of those fourteen nights. It was early ; Maria opened

the door : she was always the first to rise. The visitor was a young girl, dressed very well, almost fashionably. Only her shoes—too sturdy, and very dusty—betrayed someone different.

Maria summed her up with a glance. Their eyes met. The girl's blue eyes contained a mute question, insistent and anxious ; Maria's green eyes stared indifferently : they knew the answer.

" Is Marek at home ?" Krystyna asked.

" He's still asleep. Is it urgent ?"

" Yes. He must be woken up at once."

" Please come in." Maria led the visitor into the sitting-room. " She's well bred, come of a good family," she thought as the young lady sat down easily in an arm-chair, and crossed her legs. " And graceful," she noted. " And not at all bad-looking," she added rather reluctantly, as she went into the bedroom.

" Get up, Marek, there's someone to see you," Krystyna heard her say, through the half-open door. The tone was rather too affectionate, yet authoritative : it hurt her, she did not know why. " She's a bitch !" she decided long before Korda came out of the bedroom, a dressing-gown negligently draped over his pyjamas.

He stopped short at the door. He recognised Krystyna ; his sleepy face reflected his astonishment. His dark-ringed eyes lit up for a moment.

" You here ?" he said, going across to her and holding out his hand. " What do you want me for ?"

" I've come from Gabriel," Krystyna said, with a meaning glance at Maria.

" How is that ? What about Olga ?"

She did not answer.

" You must excuse me," she said after a long silence. " I'd prefer . . ." She glanced at Maria again.

" Oh, pardon me !" Only now did he get what she was

hinting at. "You don't know each other, do you?" He looked at Maria, trying to think of some possible name by which he could introduce her. She came to his help:

"My name's Kontecka," she said emphatically, holding out her hand to Krystyna.

"... inska." Krystyna gabbled her name, artfully swallowing the first syllable.

"You can talk quite freely," Korda said. "Mrs. Kontecka is in the work. What's happened to Olga?"

"She's finished. I've been transferred to her job."

The news was received with a brief silence: this loss was not the first, nor would it be the last. Another nameless individual eliminated: Marek did not even know Olga's real name.

"Well, and what do you want me for?" he asked very officially: now he was the squad commander.

"You take over your duties tomorrow. At 16 hours, at Franek's." Krystyna also dropped into the official tone. "Have you a photograph for your new documents? And what name do you propose to adopt?"

"I don't know." He hesitated for a moment. "Nowak, plain Nowak. Jan Nowak," he added.

She made a note of the name.

"Profession?" she asked, with her pencil poised ready.

"Merchant will do. They can fill in the rest as they wish. But the photograph's a more difficult question. I haven't got one at the moment... Brutus has one of a sort," he added after a moment's reflection.

"Excellent! I've got to see him today. I think that's all."

She rose to go. She felt no desire to remain here. The 'bitch' got on her nerves.

"One second, Miss Krystyna," he detained her. "Papers have got to be provided for Mrs. Eva too." He changed Maria's name to suit his fancy.

" I haven't any photograph here," Maria broke in, giving him a reproving look. " There's no hurry. I'll give you one before you go, Marek."

II

AN AUGUST evening. Marek was sitting in an arm-chair, in the dusk of the unlighted room. His legs were perched comfortably on another chair. He was resting, waiting. At any moment now Maria would come in, would stroke his head. " Will she smile, or won't she?" he was thinking. He was afraid of her compressed lips, of remarks curt and too pointed; he could not stand the vertical furrow that drew her brows together in a clasp of intense thought.

A sweet scent floated in from the garden through the open window. The remnants of the twilight hour were flying into the embrace of night. He closed his eyes. Against the screen of his lids he reviewed the day's course of events: scraps of an important conversation in connection with secret training in the forest of Kampinos: a three-day exercise with arms (the lads would be delighted); an expedition with an instructor in sapping operations (this new fellow with the beaked nose was rather too cautious: he wanted to have a covering guard); a report on execution of a sentence (Konrad was a great lad: so phlegmatic, and with a macabre humour). The plans for tomorrow were straightforward: a job on the railway line running through the forest about ten miles north of Warsaw. There would be another mention in the Underground Bulletin; he smiled boastfully at the pleasant thought. He liked to read about his exploits, even if it was only a few words, a brief note, the name of the locality, dry figures; ' In reprisal

for the German terrorism the railway line was destroyed at . . . losses, none . . .

He had no reason to be ashamed of his work. During the six weeks or so since he had taken over the squad he had done one or two things : three refresher courses in mining, sapping and diversionary activity, without one German attack during the courses and despite the transport of considerable equipment ; two big jobs in the district : one attacking a military convoy and the other an ammunition train ; several covering guards for meetings and for the wireless group ; six or seven sentences executed . . . Very good results.

"And still one lives somehow or other," he thought sluggishly. "Perhaps rather too well." True, he gave Maria two-thirds of his pay for their joint maintenance, but . . . The food she provided was first-class : hams, poultry, expensive French preserves—that sort of thing must cost much more. And the drinks ! Not one day, or rather night, passed without corks popping. He had asked her once where she obtained it all. She answered that she was well off from pre-war days, she was selling her jewellery at a good price, she had some capital.

"Why worry ? She's not stealing it, that's sure !" Korda, the diffident conspirator, the uncritical lover, decided. "So long as she hasn't been caught and won't be late again tonight."

A sudden anxiety jolted him out of his pleasant indolence. He shut the heavy shutters, switched on the lamp ; damn it ! half past nine. The German patrols would already be out.

It was hard to wait for his own private world, in that bloodstained Warsaw world. Distant shots from the direction of the airport, the roar of a speeding car in the nearby Avenue of Independence, then silence : too long a silence—everything would flow back as an echo, as a troubled picture, a spasm of sudden fear. The bonds of normal self-control would snap ; his imagination—the enemy of the brave—would begin to

play tricks. "She may have been caught at the arms dump, that fool of a Brutus may have drawn her into some pub." "No, of course not; she was to call on Janusz."

"Or perhaps," he reasoned to himself, "perhaps she's simply spending the night with that friend of her's . . . what's her name . . . Klara. Yes, that's quite possible. During our last tiff she said she sometimes stops with Klara, she has a spare room . . ."

It was another matter that he had never met this Klara, did not know her address, or what she did. He began to feel angry. He walked about the room with long strides: five paces from the door to the window over the heavy pile carpet, turn, and so on and on. The furniture got in his way; he was irritated by the divan with its luxurious bedspread. He fumed, he kicked over a chair. He picked it up at once and set it carefully by the wall, a little calmer and a little ashamed of himself.

The clock in the dining-room began to strike in a deep, melodious note: ten o'clock. Then silence again: restless, not ringing in the ears, but rather jabbing his nerves with a million sharp needle-points. He waited: one little sound might change into the touch of a soothing hand, into a laugh, into a sudden caress. He stood by the door to the hall. Listening.

At last! There she was at last. The rattle of a key in the lock, the click of the switch.

"Maria! It's past ten already. Why are you so late again?"

"Oh, we'll have a scene, but I'll show her this time." He did not stir from his place, did not go to meet her, did not take her coat. He drew himself up, sulking, trying to cover his excessive relief with an artificial storm of anger.

"Child!" Maria said, taking him by the arm. A little, resisted tug; a second, stronger. It was hopeless: like a fish struggling on a hook, only working it deeper. Perfume,

that perfume ; an embrace, a burning kiss.

"Where have you been ?" he asked, when they sat down to supper.

A smile, pleasant, rather humble, and mysterious. Those smiles always disarmed him. He could not resist them, especially since she had cut her hair short, which made her look much younger—both in life and in the photograph on her false identity papers. No one would have recognized the liaison Eva as Maria Krynska.

"Don't you know, lieutenant ?" she said. "I've rushed all over Warsaw today. There was tomorrow's course for the third section—is that nothing ? And the papers for 'Dragon' ? Hubert has changed his hide out, I had to look for him on the other side of the river.

"And besides," she added in a serious tone," after all, you know the regulations : you mustn't, and you cannot know everything. I, too, have contacts with higher-ups. You worry about me unnecessarily, I'll always manage somehow."

September. The oblong of Ursinowska Square was strewn with the first autumn leaves : red, yellow, brown. Marek did not notice the harmonies of colour carried by the wind. He was annoyed. Why had this perfectly idiotic job been pushed on to him ?

He would gladly have vented his annoyance on Brutus, striding beside him. But he had no excuse for that : the lad hadn't been late for the rendezvous today. On the contrary, he had been waiting for him at the timber-yard a good quarter of an hour.

"Now, listen !" Marek began peevishly. "I'll explain our task to you. The director of the 'Kaleidoscope' Theatre is being blackmailed by gangsters. So far he's paid up, they've had a tidy bit out of him. Now he's appealed to our authorities : he's got contacts of some kind with higher-ups."

"I know that sort of contact," Brutus interrupted.

"He's probably had a drink with someone in an 'Assault Force'. He must have plenty of ready cash."

"Clever, aren't you!" Marek snapped at him. "A drink or not, what's that got to do with it? We're going along to see him now. The gangsters are due to call on him at four." He looked at his watch. "We've got plenty of time, we'll wait there for them. Don't try to force the pace; I'll have a little chat with them first. And don't shoot unless they begin it; we may be able to settle it without bloodletting. Here it is," he added as he noted the number of a house.

They knocked at the door of a villa. A man, perhaps fifty years of age, well nourished, with a clean-shaven, bloated face, opened to them. His eyes, lined with care, shifted restlessly. He recovered his assurance a little when Marek gave the password.

Korda took a good look about him. In the study, which opened off the hall, he issued his instructions:

"Show them in here," he told the director, "and take your seat at the desk. We shall be behind the door and that cupboard, so that they don't see us as they come in."

"Only, don't shoot, gentlemen," the director pleaded. He waved his hand round the room: "the furniture, the pictures! And besides, the noise may bring the police down on us."

"We shall see, we shall see; we'll do just what's necessary," Marek said evasively. "What about your neighbours? And is there anyone else in the house?"

"No. I've sent my family into the country. The neighbours are quiet people, Poles. But they may get alarmed . . ."

"Leave us to do our job. You'd find a glass of water helpful; your nerves are rocky, I can see." Korda said impatiently.

The lover of quiet and unpublicized protection looked despondently at his two protectors, then at his watch.

Evidently he had a happy thought, for he stared down at his shoes, considering his next remark :

"There's plenty of time," he said at last. "Perhaps you'll come into the dining-room for a minute or two. I've got some quite good vodka."

They were having a second round when the door-bell rang sharply. Marek and Brutus went at once to their posts. They heard the street door opened, steps in the hall.

"Please come into my study, gentlemen."

They came in. The nervous director hurried, rather too quickly, behind the rampart of the solid desk. He reached for his cigarette-box. The gangsters—there were two of them—halted on the other side of the desk. To Marek and Brutus they were simply anonymous figures, not worth ten zlotys ; at any moment they might be dead meat.

Korda closed the door and locked it. Brutus came out from behind the cupboard, one hand thrust under his jacket. The gangsters turned smartly, with a single impulse, as though pulled by the one string. Two young faces, rather grey and lined ; one of them quite intelligent-looking, the other with a snub-nose, gaping mouth, and dull expression. They both stared at Marek, blinking : not with fear, but certainly not with pleasure. Their hands hung down beside their bodies, they made no attempt at a hostile demonstration.

Marek recognised them as old acquaintances. He turned to the director :

"Leave it to me. And you go too," he added to Brutus.

When they had gone out Marek sat down at the desk. The gangsters were obviously jolted out of their usual rut : they stood like scholars up before the headmaster, their eyes fixed on the floor. There followed a halting, unhurried conversation. They all talked quietly, as though by a kind of gentleman's agreement ; the words came slowly, awkwardly, forced out with difficulty.

"Well," Korda began, gazing at the toes of his leg-boots.

"So you thought the director would be waiting on his own to see you . . . he'd hand over a few more thousand . . ."

The older of the two blackmailers, the dark, intelligent-looking man, seemed to be deeply pondering on the opinion just expressed.

"These days anything's possible," he said at last philosophically. "What can you be sure of today? It's the times . . ."

A long silence. Marek glanced up at them.

"Yes, I know all about it . . . And I tell you straight, I really don't know what to do with you."

He bowed his head, as though studying his boots was the only way to reach a decision. He recalled Gabriel and the formulas his old commander had used when handling certain tasks.

"Really, I don't know what to do with you," he repeated, only to drop at once into the tone of his model superior officer. "One thing is sure: we won't tolerate this criminal banditry. The times are historic. All our people's efforts must be mobilized in the struggle against the occupant."

"Then perhaps we can go," the dark man said, shifting from foot to foot. The other approved this conclusion with an eloquent look.

"I'll let you go for the time being," Marek said slowly. (He had just remembered the professional nicknames of these two men: the dark one was 'Dewy', and the stupid one 'Spider'). "But . . ." He paused, and gave them a keen glance. "But tell me, why are you playing this sort of trick on Poles at this stage . . . on decent citizens . . .? Just for a miserable few thousand?"

"Take care of the pence'," 'Dewy' said. "We don't touch the poor. And besides, he's almost a German: don't you reckon he pays the Germans a lot of money in taxes on his theatre?"

"Did Victor send you?" Korda asked abruptly.

A silence ; but this time, different.

" Oh, so you knew Victor ?" ' Dewy ' at last betrayed some interest.

" Don't you recognize him ?" ' Spider ' interrupted. " He's the one who stood up to Victor at ' Basia's '."

" Why, so he is !" the first man admitted, taking a good look at Marek.

Korda continued to contemplate his boots :

" Well ? Speak up ! Did Victor send you ?"

" How could he ? We're on our own. Victor's finished."

Marek raised his head. " When ? Where ?" he asked.

" It'll be five months now. But we don't know where," ' Dewy ' answered warily. " They say he was playing at a casino that night, and afterwards he was sent somewhere. Political work, so I've heard."

" Ah, so that's it ! And now you're getting slack. Under Victor things were better for you."

" Why, of course. But when you haven't a head you go wherever you think."

" Well, you can go," Marek ended the interview. " But remember : next time I catch you at this sort of game you'll come to a sticky end. This gentleman," he tapped his finger on the desk, " is under the authorities' protection."

" Just one minute," he stopped them, as ' Spider ' took hold of the door handle, much more politely than usual. " Do you know anyone named Jurczyk ?"

" Of course," ' Dewy ' replied obediently. " She was ' the Ape's ' girl. She's terribly upset about him. Is there anything I can do ?"

" It doesn't matter. I'll call on her myself, I was with the ' Ape ' in Szucha."

Little as he wished to, Marek could not help remembering the date : it was October 20, his mother's birthday ; he hadn't seen her for years. He had cut himself off entirely

from his family for the sake of their safety : officially he was supposed to be in the Soviet-occupied area.

The day was crammed with activity. In the morning he had a meeting with Gabriel ; in the afternoon a job with his squad. He returned home with Vnuk, who was now his second-in-command. As they walked along the Avenue of Independence, the street was throbbing with the ebbing tide of humanity before the curfew hour. They exchanged views on the squad, planned dispositions and assignments for tasks immediately ahead. The talk was incessant, filled with names, or rather, pseudonyms : ' Klot, Gracian, Mopsa, Ogonczyk ', and many others. At the time Marek had no presentiment.

But later, when it had happened, just because it had happened he was able to go over all that conversation with the precision of a gramophone record. The names of his men, the words, the phrases, exclamations, and abbreviations, intelligible only to him and Vnuk, all were fixed in his memory, and remained there for ever as though consigned to a mental repository.

Everything on the ribbon of life is wound on the spool of time. When time bursts, the past returns, ceases to be the past. Once more we find ourselves in the midst of events, among people, in the course of our own and others' actions, in amazing skeins of causes, effects, and tendencies both miscarried and achieved amid shameful and exalted desires. We find ourselves both in their centre and outside them—like spectators scrutinizing themselves and others from all sides. So it will be beyond the threshold of death. But sometimes in this life also some fragment of the ribbon breaks free of the law of temporal oblivion, and remains in the memory as a persistent motif of an importunate melody. So it was with Marek.

All the evening remained impressed within him. The breath of the chilly wind, Vnuk's grip of the hand as they parted at the corner of Rozana Street, the rustle of faded

leaves, the crunch of the gravel path. The dark, empty house. Anxiety : " she's missing again " . . . Anger, frenzy, increasing as the minutes, the long-drawn-out quarters flowed past. And finally, fear.

The fear came right at the end. Not from within him. It pierced his ear in the form of a voice, guttural, undoubtedly German.

He heard it in the telephone ear-piece when, remembering that Maria was to have been at Gabriel's place during the evening, at half past ten he rang him up.

" Scharfuhrer Papst . . . " the voice began. It broke off abruptly, but the speaker did not cover the microphone. The background noises came through clearly, quite unequivocally. Someone farther away from the telephone shouted : ' Ruhe '.

Marek did not wait any longer. He put the receiver down at once. He knew the Gestapo methods, he knew their technical possibilities : they would be here within the hour.

As he loaded the spare magazine of his pistol his hands trembled a little—with fear or with haste.

In less than five minutes he was in the street ; it was empty, dark and windy. But it was safer than that villa at the other end of a wire seized by the Gestapo. He plunged into the night. He had one moment of second sight, which he forgot at once : for just one moment he knew that he was going for ever, away from Maria, from the unhappy happiness of his love, from his first command. He strode into the darkness.

I2

THE SPIDERS work by night. The webs are already spun, the traps set, the flies entangled in the interlacing threads. Now

the victims have only to be seized, overcome, strangled. One or another of them may break away after a desperate, writhing struggle ; here and there the webs spun so cunningly may be snapped ; but the majority of the victims—though they are not yet aware of it—are already in the spiders' power.

Szucha Street, Gestapo headquarters, the first floor. The central direction of the entire operation. A large desk ; spread over it, a map of Warsaw with little flags on pins stuck in the linen. There are many of them : thirty, forty, possibly even fifty. Private flats, arms dumps, postal boxes, archives—all the objects of the offensive. Beside the map is a battery of telephones : into this point the reports will flow, from it will be sent the impulses co-ordinating the net spread by two companies of Special Police, a squad of ordinary police, civilian agents, and a small army of field-grey in fifty lorries and ten motor-cycles.

At the desk is Sturmbannfuhrer Weisendorff, the director of the liquidation operation, and Rudolf Roth, his assistant. Weisendorff is studying the map by the light of a powerful adjustable lamp, the other is looking through a list of names, pseudonyms, addresses. In one place a few details have been added, in another a small cross in red ink, elsewhere an exclamation mark, or a question mark. At the main door of the office stands a vigilant sergeant, ready to transmit urgent commands.

Weisendorff checks up on the time : it is almost eleven. They have begun, as usual, at ten, so the first reports will be coming in soon.

Yes, here they come : a sharp ring of a telephone ; the City Centre is calling.

" Yes, this is Weisendorff." A murmuring whisper, like the sound-track of a film, leaks into the room for half a minute, perhaps longer. " What ? Rozana Street ? Just a second, hold on !"

"There's nothing in Rozana Street," Roth comes to his aid, running his eyes down the list.

Weisendorff lays aside the receiver, unbuttons his uniform, feels in an inner pocket, and glances at his own, private notebook. He rises, crosses the room swiftly, and goes into the next room. Through the half-closed door Roth hears a woman's voice which he knows very well.

"No, thank you," Weisendorff returns to his desk and closes the telephone conversation. "Don't bother about that. Yes, certainly . . . Damn it, you must go all out to find that Gabriel; he's the most important of the lot. Report at once. Finish."

Gabriel was already safe: it is just as well to live in a place with a way of retreat. When he heard the noise in the street and the violent ringing of the gate-bell he did not stop to listen for the shout: 'porter!'; he knew that if he did he would hear heavy footsteps on the stairs. In a moment he was out on the balcony, and across to the next apartment. In less than a minute he was hanging by his hands, clinging to a parapet at the back of the house. A gentle push with his feet—dropping from the first floor is not risky if you do it neatly and from such a position. He landed without hurt in the dark, quiet garden of a hospital. He had taken everything with him: his pistol, a book filled with dog-eared corners, even the secret bulletin which had been handed to him an hour before. He set off calmly by a safe path, he knew the hospital grounds perfectly. A few minutes later he was resting comfortably in a clean hospital bed—he had doctor friends.

A crash at the door. "Who's there?" "The porter, sir!" "Stand back, I'm going to shoot!" A short burst from an automatic pistol drills holes in the thin pine boards. "Lord Je . . ." the nearest gendarme blocks the doorway

with his riddled body, a second hastily withdraws from the field of fire. He retreats to a position above the balustrade, takes careful aim at the holes and the broken wood, aided by a powerful torch shone by a third gendarme. They fire together : Pole and German ; burst replies to burst. Ammunition, fire-power, the malicious constraint of a narrow back street (it is in a workers' district) win the battle : Vnuk lies stretched out behind the door. But not taken alive.

A swarm of agents fling themselves on the toys. Dolls go flying ; cradles, trains, lead soldiers. Efficient hands snatch up letters lying on the counter, thrust under blotting paper, mingled with accounts in the old-world office. A man in a helmet tugs with a heavy hand at the arm of an old woman in a white nightcap ; she is still only half awake. Her sister is dressing behind a screen. "Get up ! You're coming with us !" the gendarme commands. "Melcia, my dear," sister number one says to her twin, "don't be afraid, my dear ; we're very old." They go out, they pass the shop window, the heap of broken toys is piling higher and higher. A spasm of anger in two brave hearts : the children's paradise has been profaned.

Philip was sleeping soundly after his day's work. It was not he who heard the steps, the ring, the porter's voice at the door. The door was opened to them without delay—Mrs. Kasprak was afraid. The boy woke up to find himself fettered. They took his landlord and landlady too. And their daughter, a worker : she was pale, but she said nothing. The neighbours whispered a Paternoster.

Again : "Porter." A rattle of rifle-butts on the door, drumming with a dull echo. Hubert switched off the apparatus : the quiet ticking stopped. Gracjan put out the light, Janusz groped his way up the three steps of the ladder, and very cautiously let down the flap behind them. They sat

holding their breath, like foxes in a narrow hole. Quite possibly they were afraid : Janusz admitted as much later. Those others entered the room below ; the three Poles could hear their voices : German, of course. Certain words came through to them distinctly : " Jawohl, Herr Scharfuhrer . . . here . . . certainly . . . a plan . . . " " They've got plans, it's been organized in advance," Hubert whispers. They all think of their one way of escape cut off, their one Mauser. Gracjan grips its butt, feels for the spare magazine. Steps, steps, retreating, approaching ; words disappearing into the walls or suddenly reaching them along the secret sound-tracks of the voice, perhaps up the chimneys. Knock . . . knock . . . knock . . . Firm yet gentle—a systematic offensive with a hammer, plans, and a professional ear. Defence ? Only one : the stout walls of the houses in this older part of the city, a whimsy of a master craftsman many centuries ago, his love of his art, of secret lairs and hiding-places. Hubert, Gracjan, and Janusz emerge only next morning. They go to assist in servicing another secret receiving station. They will return here a month later.

Here it is all over : they are leading the prisoners down the stairs. Hanka, Wanda and their mother, who knew nothing of what her daughters had been doing. The girls' faces are set like plaster masks : pride, obstinacy, perhaps the grace of endurance. The mother's face is contorted with fear, distorted with despair. " Sirs, it's all a mistake," she tries to explain. " My daught . . . " A blow with a rifle butt in her back ; she stumbles, falls down the stairs. A kick in the belly, several shoves. They fling her into the lorry. Upstairs there are shouts of triumph. They have found letters, papers, addresses, names : clues to further liquidation.

" Would it hold or not ?" Drazga sometimes wondered, as he examined his gutter pipe. It held. Hardly had the bell

rung and the ominous shout of 'porter' sounded when he was clinging to it desperately with hands and feet. By the time the lock was shattered he was below window level, half-way down to the second floor. Quietly, quietly, carefully; his bare feet clinging surely to projections, his hands dexterously controlling the movement of his body, night covering the flight. The first floor: only three or four more gentle slides. No! Enough: the end of all the effort. A stab of brilliant light pins him to the wall; a roar of shots, a broken cry, a bloody rag on the pavement.

This jump was born of despair. Konrad had no cyanide, he was afraid of torture, he was afraid of himself. He leaped from the second floor, counting just a little on the acacia in the yard. He missed, but a branch broke his fall. They caught him: he was groaning quietly, with both legs broken.

12.30 a.m. Weisendorff sets the receiver down on the telephone fork:

"Ten Korsak Street eliminated."

He takes another flag from the map. A dozen, perhaps, still remain in various parts of Warsaw.

The telephone rings again. Roth listens to the report; they are working hard, taking turns at the receiver.

"Kryniczna Street," he says, when the report is finished. "A hard fight. They're calling for reinforcements and machine-guns."

In a tired voice the Sturmbannfuhrer dictates a further order over the internal line.

Now another report:

"Mickiewicz Street. They're escaping over the roofs. Five Germans killed. The whole block must be surrounded."

In Wilcza Street they found nothing; this was owing to feminine sagacity, good organization. The bells aroused

everybody, like alarm signals. At the front was the porter's voice ; at the back—the kitchen door—his wife's. The inmates did not hurry to open. In the kitchen, a dash of paraffin on a heap of papers ; the flame roars up the stovepipe. In the study, the dining room and bedroom, matches, lighters ; flame bursts from all the stoves, they roar away swiftly. Everywhere petrol, everything to hand. Marysia pulls the chain in the toilet : microfilms, tissues in ebonite phials, go down the drain. Everybody at his post, even the old grandfather helps ; only the child lies trembling under a warm blanket. " One moment, one moment ; I've mislaid the key," Antos's wife calling in the front hall. " Just a second, there's only the bolt now," says Mr. Ranski in the kitchen. In a couple of minutes all is ready. A horde of Germans rushes into the apartment : uniforms, civilians. Search, turmoil. Possibly everything would have passed off well, but for the stupid child. He jumped out of his bed with a shriek and fled in his shirt : a swarthy boy with a shock of curly black hair. " Jude !" one of the gendarmes snorted. A dry crack, sounding like a smack. They arrested Wladyslaw and Zbyszek, Marysia, the two Ranskis, Antos's wife, and even old grandfather Adam. All the inmates ? No ; one was left free : little Abram lay dead.

No. 8, Dygasinski Street, a secret arms dump. Here they were not taken by surprise : the lads were cleaning weapons in readiness for the next day's work. A guard gave early warning of the car splashing its way along the muddy street. Brutus took over command. By the time the Germans had found the right gate the group had drawn up a plan of operations, and every man was at his post. They waited in the veil of the night.

A crash at the gate : Brutus went to open, not too fast, yet not too slow, like any porter suddenly disturbed from sleep. The scissor blades of the headlights snipped through the

large yard ; there were two light lorries and a motor-cycle with side-car. They drove in, and put out the lights. ' Smoky ', huddled against the wall, breathed more easily. Ogonczyk, behind the large dustbin, gripped his automatic firmly. The wind had dropped ; the night was still.

A command, car-doors slammed ; the clatter of boots on the narrow sidewalk ; squelching of boots in the mud.

" Du, Mensch !" the patrol commander shouts. Brutus, the complaisant porter, stands waiting for his orders. He doesn't understand German ; he blinks foolishly, dazzled by the torchlight. A Gestapo-man in civilian dress thrusts his revolver barrel into his side—" Lead us to the arms," he orders in Polish. " This is a timber-yard, sir, a store for lime, cement, and building materials." " Lead on, open up everything !"

He leads them into the heart of the courtyard, to a large wooden shed. They move like shadows, shining their torches : the commander, the agent, ten gendarmes armed to the teeth. Quietly, only the occasional ring of a boot against a piece of scrap metal, or the rare squelch of mud, accentuates the silence.

" This is the main store," Brutus draws back the wide doors running on rollers, and lets the officer pass in. He is followed by the civilian and the gendarmes ; they are lost in the immense blackness, piercing it with the needles of their torch beams. Good ! They're all inside. Brutus quietly pushes the door back, then dives behind a line of heavy barrels. The beam from his torch strikes the roof of the store, giving the sign : three swift flashes.

A light machine-gun disturbs the silence with a long, sharp rattle. Once more it is firing at Germans, at the white eyes of their torches, at the groans and the curses. Bob and Knout do not spare the ammunition.

In the yard, only three bursts . dead sure shots, with barrels right up against bellies.

Roth went off to his room ; it was six o'clock, dawn was coming. Weisendorff remained seated at the desk. Pale, with tunic unbuttoned, he called for more coffee : it was his fifth cup. He lit a cigarette and cursed aloud, staring furiously at the map : the last flag still remained upright in the map, in the north of the city, by the blue bend of the Vistula river. From No. 8, Dygasinski Street still no report whatever.

The guard posted on the bridge across the river raised his hand ; but, seeing the military lorries, he signalled for them to pass over freely. A police motor-cycle with a Security Police officer in the side-car drove in front. The day was dawning. When they had crossed the bridge, ' Smoky ' changed up to third speed. The motor-cycle shot off, the light lorries after it. Brutus grinned : he was proud of himself, of his field-grey uniform, of the arms he had saved, and the invaluable booty he had captured.

13

MARIA . . . Maria . . . Maria . . . Maria's face, Maria's hands, her eyes . . . green eyes half concealed beneath the lids . . . or dilated, staring out of sombre depths of suffering and terror. And more far more, than that ! Through the blustering of the wind he thought he could hear an imploring whisper, a voice now for the first time calling to him for help. He started eagerly towards every occasional passer-by, hoping to catch the rhythm of her elastic tread, to discern that one figure : all his world, not to be conveyed by words, by shapes and colours, and perhaps most akin to sound, to a melody that quivered in the very depths of him, finding

expression in fits of trembling, in his beating heart, in sudden weakness or violent longing for struggle.

Though he had left the house, he was unable to break through the enchanted ring of the neighbouring streets. It was not of large circumference, it was restricted by his anxiety to do something ; he wanted to warn her if she returned home late, as so often before ; and he wanted to see whether the Germans would raid Rozana Street after getting the address from the telephone exchange.

In after life he was never able to recreate the incidents of that night, for himself or for anyone else. The preceding evening was fixed in his memory with all the sharp definition of a perfect photograph, but the night was completely lost to him. One thing alone he knew : it was a night of chaos, of torment and confusion, a night occupied only by Maria ; a night more real than any he had spent with her, and more human ; for it brimmed over with suffering.

Her name, the name 'Maria', obsessed him. It returned again and again, persistently ; it invaded his every attempt to order his thoughts, it pierced like a thorn. Or, when he dropped into a stupor, overcome by the silence, the darkness, and his own horrible impotence, it came like a caress, like a hurried breath, a sigh of delight or a whisper vibrating with devotion.

In his memory remained only the rhythm of his torment, together with the agony caused by that name : painful throbbing, sudden upsurges of hope, reassuring gleams of light, and headlong falls of despair.

When at last he feverishly returned to the house, he felt older by many years. The day had fully come, but he found no indication of a search, or of her return. He had barely had time to look about him, still less to think of food or rest, when the telephone sounded in the hall. Her name sprang at once to his lips, in a brief outburst of confidence, of tense desire. He snatched up the receiver.

He heard a woman's voice ; it sounded familiar, yet strange : not the voice he was waiting for. She recognized him at once.

" Is that Mr. Jan ? . . . I'm very glad ; I've tried to get you several times . . . How are you ? "

" Thank you, not too bad," he said, still not knowing whom he was speaking to. " And how about you ? " the question came automatically ; he was not particularly interested in the answer.

" I'm managing, though lots of people have gone down with the ' flu '." Now he realized that it was Krystyna speaking ; only one or two of the girls in the movement knew his present official pseudonym and address.

" And how are you both ? How are things at home ? " she asked after a momentary pause, to emphasise this extension of the scope of her significant questions.

" So far everything's okay," he said, realizing what she was hinting at.

" That's fine ; I'll be along in a few minutes."

She arrived soon after. Marek waited impatiently, feverishly : she might have some news of Maria. He did not, he could not ask her at once. They stood in the hall, silent, staring at each other. Her gaze betrayed rather more than official, routine curiosity. If he had been quicker in the uptake he would have noticed a new light in her vivid eyes. A look of anxiety ? Yes , but also the courage and adolescent maturity born of war conditions.

" Things look bad," he said at last, to break the awkward silence.

" We thought they were even worse."

He did not notice the eloquent glance indicating that he personally was meant. His mind was entirely fettered by Maria ; he had forgotten that he was a squad commander, that others might be anxious about him, perhaps about him above all.

"What's really happened?" he asked, still rather absently.

"They've stripped us. Many arrests last night. Losses in the district command and at headquarters. And they've completely smashed your squad."

This news shook him a little out of his lethargy.

"Who's gone?"

"We don't know the position in regard to all of them, but Vnuk's been killed: that's certain. Konrad's wounded, he's in Szucha. They've got the Ranskis, Hanka, Wanda . . ."

"How about Gabriel? I rang him up last night just as they were searching his place."

"They didn't get him. He got away through the window."

"Is there any news of Maria?"

"Who?"

"Maria Krynska," he answered impatiently.

She looked at him; not suspiciously, only puzzled and questioning. He realized his slip at once.

"Eva, my liaison," he corrected himself.

"We haven't any news of her," she said in a different, rather sharper tone. "I took for granted you'd know. After all . . ."

"She hasn't been home since yesterday," he explained in almost his normal voice. Now he had himself under control. He was hoping Krystyna would not remember the name he had blurted out. He had no knowledge of the hidden logic that governs events, the storms that can be provoked by a heedless gesture, a casual word, or trifling oversight—storms that afterwards carry one away helplessly.

"Well, we can leave that for the moment," he said in a practical tone. "What have you come for now?"

"You're to see Gabriel at three. At a new centre, Jablonka the dentist's; No. 10, Zloty Street"

Gabriel had his hands full. He had Beyzym, an old M.I. man from the high command, to help him, but he had to

deal personally with the majority of the innumerable problems raised by the great German raid. He was personally acquainted with almost every one of those who had been arrested, he knew all the work entrusted to Marek's squad, he was the one who could best anticipate how far the Germans might proceed with their liquidation operations, and what steps had to be taken in order to forestall them.

From the very beginning he had suspected that the raid on his place was no sporadic and fortuitous affair. Even before he retired to rest as a hospital patient he had some news of what was happening in the city: the doctors had night passes, and the public telephone in the Central Telegraph Office could be used without risk. So he was able to get a warning to Beyzym and to issue the most urgent orders from his bed. His dog-eared book once more stood the test.

The centre at the timber yard had been eliminated, but a new one was at once arranged. When he turned up at about eleven o'clock next morning at the apartment of Mrs. Jablonska, the dentist, he found more than a dozen reports already awaiting his attention. They did not bring cheerful news: so far the total losses were four killed and fifteen arrested, including one or two who could not be expected to resist the Gestapo's softening-up process.

His greatest worry was due to the arrest of Hanka and Wanda: almost certainly the orders and addresses he had given them only the same day had fallen into the Germans' hands. He was just recalling what links in the organization were threatened in consequence when there was a knock at the door. Krystyna entered.

"Well, what news of Marek?" he asked, pointing to a chair.

"He's safe. I found him at home. He'll be here at three."

"Fine! Had he anything new to say about the raid?"

"Nothing at all. He was only worried about you. He phoned you yesterday."

"Not from his home? At what time?"

"It must have been from home, though he didn't say. He rang up while they were searching your place."

Gabriel was lost in thought. He drummed his fingers on the table. His weary face was set in a look of concentration.

"Well . . . good!" he said at last. "But how does he seem?"

"He struck me as looking pretty queer," she said slowly. She paused as though collecting her impressions. "I think he's in a fever. He seems terribly upset about that Krynska woman: she hasn't been home all night."

Gabriel looked at her with sudden interest.

"What name did you say? Krynska?"

"Yes."

"Who is she? What's her Christian name?"

"She's his liaison. It appears her name's Maria, but she was called Eva in the organization." She hesitated, adding reluctantly: "They were living together."

"That's the lot, I think. Thank you."

She went out. He rose and stood by the window. He gazed down into the busy street, but he did not take in much of what he saw. He was fascinated by a name.

"Krynska . . . Krynska . . . Krynska . . ." He was sure he had heard that name before; in fact he felt sure he had seen it in print, or rather, in type . . . Ah, that was it: typed with an old ribbon . . . on a machine that had none of the Polish signs.

Yes, but there was more to it than that, surely?

He rubbed his forehead, pressed his fingers against his temples. Nothing came, nothing: his vacant memory sent out no responsive echo. He leaned on the window sill and stared down into the street, now more conscious of the life pulsing below him in a stream of hats, caps, bare heads, an occasional helmet. Seen from that angle they swarmed like extraordinary insects, or colourful birds hopping along the

ground.

One of the hats particularly caught his eye : it was green, with a jaunty little brush at the back. A man's hat, quite a common sort of Tyrolean pork-pie. It moved slowly along the opposite sidewalk, and halted before a cinema entrance, evidently its owner was looking at the stills displayed outside.

" . . . Maria Yvonne Krynska . . . " Gabriel whispered the names as they floated up like corks to the surface of his memory. That hat with its brush had rescued them from oblivion : Captain Cytara had worn one exactly like it.

He closed his eyes. Now he had no difficulty in reading the pages reopened before him. Or, to be exact, the legal reports. He turned them over again, as he had in March, when the case had been remitted to him :

' MARIA YVONNE KRYNSKA '. The name printed clearly, though obviously through a worn ribbon ; capital letters, without the acute accent which should have been above the N of Krynska. The charge sheet ; report of the investigation ; witnesses' statements , a list of her victims, with Cytara's name at the top, followed by many others, chiefly staff officers, a few women, one or two civilians. At the bottom of the file, on a separate sheet : the sentence. Across it an instruction, written very clearly, in red ink : ' Remitted to the execution squad '.

A hand was laid on his shoulder ; it snatched him out of his meditation. He turned. It was Beyzym.

" When Korda arrives," Gabriel said, " leave him alone with me. I've got to have a talk with him."

When he later surveyed that talk with Gabriel from the perspective of time, as part of the sequence of events, Marek recognized it as marking a turning-point in his life. He had gone to the meeting a young fighter, sick and feverish, truly, and tense with anxiety, but still fit for struggle, longing for speedy action. Out of his superior officer's presence walked a

shadow, a wreck of a man. If amputation is ever salutary, it was so then : Marek was saved. But half of him was cut away. The secret unity of love and suffering was destroyed, the enslaving bond was snapped, he was set free. But together with Maria he lost his faith in human beings and goodness, he lost all the remnants of his trust, sympathy, compassion.

Afterwards he thought of Gabriel without anger, indeed, with admiration. The operator was an artist. He worked surely, without hesitation ; cautiously at first, as though wearing gloves, but then swiftly and radically. He made intelligent use of narcotics.

Gabriel welcomed Marek with a long, piercing look. The younger man made no attempt to face up to that look ; he felt weak, in the grip of a power of quite uncertain dimensions.

" Sit down."

Gabriel himself did not sit down. He pushed his chair away and walked about behind the desk, with the great window as background. Three steps to the right-hand wall, then five to the opposite wall, and so continually, like a pendulum. Thus Marek's memory retained that elastic form, the expressive profile, tired, but concentrated, strong with determination, commanding obedience, insisting on attention.

He stopped from time to time, rested his hand on the edge of the desk, and stood gazing down at his subordinate, always discreetly authoritative, probing every secret of Marek's heart, but himself inscrutable.

Korda felt wretched and miserable. To the preliminary questions concerning the raid he could give no answers. Bewildered, he listened to the toll of the final account : the names of seven killed, thirty-two arrested. He learned of Brutus' exploit, of the flight of Macialek, Leon, and a few others. He supplied details that enabled Gabriel to issue further orders. He replied with precision, but almost like an automaton. He had an extraordinary feeling of alienation,

of isolation. The whole affair flowed past him, or rather, over him, over the surface of his sensibilities ; it did not affect the personal core of his being, the central fire that was consuming his entrails, throbbing with a secret, almost voluptuous pain.

As he mentioned addresses, pseudonyms, names, as he suggested means of safeguarding equipment and securing threatened lives, he continually felt an intimate quiver within him, the agony of a lost happiness. " Enough ! Enough !" As he communicated the official information he was possessed with a desire for silence, for concentration, for complete solitude. To shut himself off, to draw completely apart, to roll himself into a ball, to shelter with all his being that burning, agonizing core—let it throb, let it wrench, let it corrode with that one name.

Gabriel summoned one of his liaisons and began to dictate urgent instructions to her. Korda closed his eyes and gave himself over to his torment, indifferent to everything else , almost happy that the interview was coming to an end. He did not even notice when the girl went out. Gabriel's voice aroused him from his torpor.

" Light up !" he said, handing him a crumpled cigarette taken from his pocket. He again looked at Marek attentively, but from a different angle : it was as though he were mentally X-raying the young man, examining him and penetrating him for a continually new aspect.

" I don't like the look of you," he said, drawing back into his chair. " You've taken a bad knock, haven't you ? You're upset about the squad."

" I've caught cold," Korda muttered.

" An M.I. Commission has been set up to inquire into the raid. They've stripped us a hundred per cent. With unprecedented precision. What do you make of that ?"

Marek was silent, astonished not so much by the question as by the fact that he had not thought of asking it himself.

" The raid was directed from inside," Gabriel said with

emphasis. "It was worked from your squad."

He broke off. Holding his pencil between two fingers, he tapped the end on the desk.

"It is ascribed to . . ."

He stopped again, giving Korda yet another chance to catch the drift of his remarks. Without waiting for any reaction, he laid down his pencil and brought out his book. He opened it, turned over several pages, and ran his eye down the page.

"It is ascribed to Maria Krynska," he added abruptly.

"Who?" Marek choked with the word. He started up, seized the edge of the desk, and stood leaning forward, staring into Gabriel's face, gaping, gasping for breath.

"Maria Krynska," Gabriel said distinctly. "The woman you should have shot in accordance with the sentence of the court. In March, if my memory is not at fault. The woman with whom you've been living; or rather, with whom you're still living."

Marek said nothing. He covered his face with his hands, as though protecting his eyes against the intrusive light. He felt that the earth had collapsed beneath him, that he was hanging in a black, empty void that crushed his brain and stifled him. He saw nothing, heard nothing. Gabriel's words seemed only lost in the void. At that moment they did not wound him, though they were not altogether lost: no just blow miscarries, no stab due to one fettered by love and suffering fails to hurt. To Marek, too, the words that were blows would return. Later he would gather them all up, would tear them out of his memory like thorns thrust into the foot: all the worse that the wounds had festered.

"So you don't remember Krynska?" Gabriel said with a touch of irony. "But perhaps you do remember Eva, your liaison. She hasn't been back home since yesterday, has she? Don't worry, she'll be all right, she's got good protectors. Mr. Weisendorff will look after her."

Marek was still silent, very far away. Gabriel waited a moment, allowing the silence to speak.

"Lieutenant Korda," he said at last in an official tone, as Marek removed his hands from his face and shrank back in his chair. "I have been entrusted with the task of interrogating you. What have you to say in regard to Krynska, who is suspected of high treason?"

Marek gazed into his eyes. A look of perversity preceded the firm answer :

"I have nothing to say."

"So you refuse to make any statement? That's bad."

Silence ; an indefinite movement of the head. Marek slumped still deeper in his chair, resting his head against the back, and gazing vacantly at the ceiling.

"I advise you to reconsider your attitude," Gabriel added in a less official tone "We have means of getting to the bottom of this matter, of establishing the whole truth."

He rose from his chair, walked swiftly round the desk and, halting behind Marek, put one hand on his shoulder.

"There's really no hurry," he said in an almost friendly tone. "I can see you've had a bit of a shock, you're ill, and worn out. I don't accuse you of a deliberate crime ; you've given many a proof of your courage and prudence."

He went to a bookshelf and took down a bottle and two glasses : the narcotic.

"Let's have a drink," he said, pouring out the vodka. "This'll do your chill good. I feel pretty bad too, I must admit ; I hardly slept a wink last night."

Korda reached greedily for the glass. He tossed the drink off swiftly. He began to emerge from the void. Once more he felt ground under his feet, his mind took in words and phrases that came not from his superior officer, but from a friend, one to whom he could talk freely, one who would understand, would realize, and perhaps would even forgive.

The second glass of strong vodka clarified his mind.

Maria's late homecomings, her nights spent with ' Klara ', her vague answers and equivocal silences, all those evasions and reserves which he had always dismissed, crazed as he was with kisses, with rapturous exclamations, with voluptuous delight, were now arranged in a definite order ; they lost their blurred outlines, they were transformed into the unchallengable text of a terrible charge.

Unmanned by his torment, softened up by the alcohol, he felt an imperative necessity to expose that core of his suffering, to cast it out of him, to share it with Gabriel. He told everything.

His superior officer cunningly dosed him with two effective opiates : genuine warmth, and vodka. But Marek sobered up at once when, after listening to all his intimate confidences, Gabriel closed the interview. Stiff and official again, he returned to his seat, reached for his book, unhurriedly turned down one or two corners, closed it, and put it in his pocket.

" The case will be remitted to a court-martial," he said curtly. " You will await further orders. I'll arrange at once for you to have accommodation."

He went to the door, opened it, and nodded to a liaison. Krystyna entered.

" Have you got a room vacant anywhere ?" he asked.

" For Marek ?" Her eyes told even more than the haste of her question.

" Yes, for Lieutenant Korda."

" I can put him up at home ; we' ve got a room free."

" Excellent. Take him there at once."

THE PRIVATE Fiat drove up to the rickshaw rank in Ordinacka Street close to its junction with Nowy Swiat Street. The gentleman at the wheel, a solid-looking individual in a sports jacket, switched off the blue car lights and looked at his watch. It was 9.15 ; he had a few minutes to spare. When he lit a cigarette the feeble flame picked out his little black moustaches: the old-world adornment of a face rather too plump.

His flabby hand covered the glow of the cigarette, his small, darting eyes surveyed the street, dumb, though garrulous with the echo of many footsteps, the sidewalks twinkling with the patches of light cast by torches, heaving with the silhouettes of pedestrians.

A drunken man started out from the corner, reeled in the gleam of passing car lights, and was engulfed in the darkness. The form emerged again and floated up to the Fiat, uncertainly, like a boat at the mercy of a changeable wind.

" Taxi ! Are you free ? "

" This is a private car. Take a rickshaw. "

" You don't say ! Impossible ! I tell you it's a . . . taxi. "

The face, inflamed with vodka, was thrust over the lowered window, insolently, but good-naturedly.

The man abruptly drew back and vanished : he was blown away by the sound of a shot, a shout emerging from the darkness flung him into the rickshaw standing behind the car. They drove off with all the rattle and clatter of overworked scrap-iron.

" Police ! Murder ! " someone was shouting somewhere round the corner in Nowy Swiat. Two more shots : they ended the discord ; the ground bass of street murmurs and

rustles returned, accentuated by the purring and sudden snorting of the Fiat's engine.

The Fiat was driven off rapidly. It turned to the left, into Nowy Swiat, moving slowly, deliberately: a black fish floating along with the nocturnal current, with gleaming eyes seeking out its prey.

Steady, steady! In a moment or two now. The driver's ears picked up the sound of voices in the darkness; his eyes distinguished human forms as he searched among the lights dancing along the sidewalk.

The clatter of running feet breaks through the tapping of the slower footsteps; two definite shapes start out of the anonymous background; a metallic click of door-handles, the crash of two car-doors; the two shapes are already inside, the car shoots off at full throttle.

There was no pursuit. Turning into Jerzolimaska Avenue, the stout driver slowed down a little. He took his right hand from the wheel and stretched it out to the young man who was now sitting beside him.

"Hand it over!" he said.

The tightly packed bag changed owners yet again, transferred from the passenger's knees to the driver. He thrust it down beside him, holding it firmly with his fingers.

The car sped without unseemly hurry past the main railway station and out to the bounds of the city. The feeble gleams of torches, the grinding of the last trams, all the murmur and rustle of the city were left behind. The car rushed smoothly over the highroad in the rhythm of a long, unbroken run.

The hum of kilometres speeding under the wheels; telegraph poles, white stones, little houses picked out by the head-lamps, the tinkle of gravel rattling against the mud-guards. Otherwise stillness, silence. Only the glow of cigarettes witnessed to the existence of human beings: obviously self-absorbed, disinclined for conversation.

Twenty minutes after leaving the city they were in the summer resort of Milanowa. Around them was pine forest, silence ; here and there a dog started to bark only to break off abruptly. The driver turned into a sandy side-road. The headlights slipped over a gate with a small wooden roof. Above the gate was a name : ' Villa Melania '.

Assisted by the man who had sat beside him, the stout gentleman drove the car into a garage. The other man, much taller, had got out at the gate and gone off to the house without saying a word. He left the kitchen door open. After locking up the garage the others followed him along the streak of light from the door : the driver with a stout bag under his arm, and the slim, dark youngster, agile and swift of movement, in a leather jacket.

The kitchen ; beyond it a passage leading to a room : an extraordinary place. A large room lit by a hanging paraffin lamp giving sufficient light to reveal the disorder, the litter, yet not enough to enable one to pick out the details, except that it contained an abundance of furniture obviously brought from all the rest of the house. The blue tobacco haze hovering round the lamp was mingled with the smell of vodka, merging into a stinking odour, of filth and crime. In a word : a typical hide-out.

The man with the bag entered first ; the dark youngster followed him, like an adjutant. Their travelling companion had already removed his overcoat and was standing by the table, under the lamp, with his back to the door, pouring out a glass of vodka. In the room were two men playing cards, while a third had stretched out his enormous carcass on a couch. His face was broad and flat , he was obviously drunk, but still conscious : he turned his bleary eyes on the arrivals with momentary interest, then returned to his contemplation of the ceiling. The players showed no sign of interest at all : either they had not noticed the newcomers' entry or did not attach any importance to them.

The stout man went up to the table ; a gleam of golden light fell on his bald patch.

" Mr. Antoni ! " he spoke to one of the players.

The call was acknowledged only after the hand had been played, while his partner was collecting a banknote or two. The owner of the name looked up interrogatively, with blood-shot eyes :

" Well, how did things go ? A good haul ? "

" I want to talk business ; " the stout man lifted the bag significantly and glanced at a door leading to a further room. Antoni's partner caressed the bag with greedy eyes.

" Well, what of it ? Can't you talk with us present ? " he asked, of no one in particular.

" The ' Count's ' dead right, " said the man named Antoni.

He got up heavily and went to the table, flashing the whites of his eyes sombrely, rather too theatrically.

" Out with it ; we're all in the swim, we can talk here, " he added with a sweeping gesture obviously copied from some film star.

Making no attempt to conceal his annoyance, the stout gentleman put the bag on the table. He hesitated a moment, then tried to open the strong lock. He was rather slow at the job ; his fat fingers slipped on the metal, his hands trembled nervously.

" You look a bit shabby, director. Alek, go and get my scythe, " Antoni ordered.

The dark youngster hurried to obey the order. Three neat cuts with the blade of the cut-throat razor, and the lock dropped away together with a layer of leather. The car driver emptied out the contents : packets of dollars.

He began to arrange them in heaps, with all the dexterity of a bank cashier. Five pairs of eyes followed every movement of his moist fingers ; the gangsters stood in a half-circle round the table. The giant had dragged himself off the couch, and his freckled face dominated them all in the centre, like a clasp

holding together a garland of varied sins . . . but not the most filthy : neither pride nor cowardly extortion.

The 'director' did not trouble to count every individual note ; he picked up each packet, examined the paper band, and put each in its appropriate place. Soon ten unequal piles were lying side by side on the table ; each pile represented a thousand dollars, in twenty, ten and five-dollar notes.

The stout man ran his eye over the gangsters' faces. He knew them well, he felt just a little afraid of them : Antoni, an old bandit, formerly very active and energetic, but now sluggish and apathetic ; the 'Count', elegant, a card addict, a parasitic jester ; Vaska, the giant, a deserter from General Wlasow's Russian force fighting under the Germans , 'Tec', a former police detective, arrogant, but a fine shot ; and Alek, the youngster, the best of the bunch. They all stared silently at the rainbow-coloured notes ; they could not tear their eyes away from such a fortune.

The 'director' pushed two twenty-dollar packets across to Antoni. He picked up a third, weighed it in his hand with a caressing, regretful gesture, then threw it across the table after the others. No one touched them , Antoni didn't bat an eyelid.

Only when the stout man began to pack all the remaining packets into the bag was the ring of silence broken : a silence customary perhaps in such circumstances, yet unpleasant to sensitive ears—ominous, menacing.

" You're taking a bit of a risk tonight, director," 'Tec' said, smiling sarcastically. His small insolent eyes stared at the stout man derisively and provocatively. " It ain't wise to carry all that dough around with you," he added.

" I don't understand," the 'director' said. He stopped gathering up the packets and gave Antoni a wary, yet dignified glance.

" The bag is material evidence," 'Tec' continued, lingering fondly over the legal terminology he knew so well

from past experience. "The best thing would be to burn it at once. It's got a very unusual lock: hand work, made to order!"

He stopped, as though exhausted by the variety and importance of the truths he had expressed. He paused to note their effect, a smile lurking on his thin lips.

"And as for the notes," the 'Count' broke in, drawing a nail-file out of his pocket and nonchalantly starting to manicure his nails; "you're asking for trouble travelling by night with such a sum. You'd better leave a few more packets behind."

The stout gentleman abruptly turned and looked at him. Seeing that the 'Count' was absorbed in cleaning and filing his nails, he looked back at the chief of the gang, seeking his help.

Antoni stared at the floor, took a deep breath, and blew it out again, puffing his cheeks. "Well, there's some sense in what the 'Count' says, director," he remarked, obviously weighing his words. "You don't rate us very high do you?" He waved his right hand over the three untouched packets of dollars. "That doesn't amount to much."

The director started with annoyance. He opened his mouth more than once to say something, but the words stuck in his throat, like a fishbone.

The lamp began to smoke. Without breaking the silence Antoni carefully turned down the wick. The 'Count' continued his operations with the file, holding his fingers under the lamp and examining them very solicitously. 'Tec' unbuttoned his jacket and thrust his hands into his belt, revealing the black butt of a pistol hanging over his belly. Vaska blinked down at them all, gazing vacantly at the man with the case, then at 'Tec', at the 'Count's' nail-file. Alek went to a cupboard, opened it, and looked for something.

"Mr. Antoni," the car-driver got out at last, "I really don't understand. What's the reason for this change of attitude?"

He wriggled his dyed moustaches up and down several times ; it was a favourite trick of his, possibly effective in his own home, but completely useless here.

The gangster said nothing ; he stood watching Alek, who had sat down at the card table and was taking a pistol to pieces : he was pedantically fond of cleaning weapons. The 'Count' returned his nail-file to his pocket. He looked once more with great satisfaction at his fingers, then reached leisurely for the vodka bottle. He filled a glass.

"It's up to you, Felus," he said to 'Tec' as if there were no one else in the room. "You've made a good haul today."

He drank the vodka at one gulp, his gaze passed over the director as though he were not there. The stout man clenched his teeth, clutched the edge of the table with his fingers, and leaned over it as if trying to read what was written on the band of one of the packets. This strange, almost ascetic restraint on the part of the gangsters was obviously affecting his nerves. He evidently found the tense silence, broken only by an occasional remark, more difficult to endure than arguments or furious demands. He was not interested in reading what was written on the paper band : he was procrastinating, seeking a way out, trying to conceal his disquiet.

"I really don't understand what you're getting at," he began again in a different tone, conciliatory and gentle. "Are you having a bad time working with me ? Am I putting you on to bad jobs ? What you picked up a week ago at Zeidel's—was that a trifle ? And the Savings Bank ? And the job at Lodz ? You had a thousand dollars apiece that time. Vaska, you say !" he turned to the giant. "Are you so hardly done by ? Haven't you got plenty of money ?"

The man with the freckled face began to blink violently, as though he had just woke up. He nodded towards the 'Count' :

"I had money," he muttered half in Russian, half in Polish. "But I've lost it all at cards."

"Then don't play cards; don't be such a fool," the 'director' retorted. "Really, I didn't expect this from you, Mr. Antoni. You know the expenses I have. This villa, cars, reconnaissance, bribes. I have to pay for everything. God strike me dead if I get twenty per cent. on what we earn: certainly much less than you."

"All I want is justice, director," Antoni replied.

He ran his eyes demonstratively, almost conciliatorily over his men. 'Tec' reacted by turning away. The 'Count' shrugged his shoulders and pulled a derisive face.

The 'director' stood thinking for some time, on his face a look of intense calculation. He stared at the banknotes as though mentally rearranging them, sharing them out carefully among his creditors.

"I'll suffer for the sake of peace," he said at last.

He gave Antoni another packet of notes, then dropped the empty bag on the floor. "Give me a case of some sort," he said.

Alek brought a leather document case, and the 'director' hurriedly packed the rest of the notes into it. He straightened up and made a gesture as though about to hold out his hand to Antoni, but stopped himself at the last moment.

The 'Count' and 'Tec' stood silent, with moody faces. They had their backs turned to their chief: presumably they had expected to get even more, or possibly they were preparing the ground for dealing in their turn with Antoni.

Alek went to the garage to bring out the car. The 'director' buttoned up his coat and looked for his hat. Suddenly the 'Count' turned and went up to him, staring at him fixedly, derisively.

"Perhaps you'd like a game?" he suggested. "At poker or nap? You're an expert at cards . . ."

The stout man started, but controlled himself at once.

"I haven't time," he said brusquely. "I must be going."

He went to the door. But as he heard the 'Count's' jeering voice he stopped with his hand on the handle.

"It's a bad game for you, sir. And not one of the best for me, either; I've played with better men, Mr. Salinski."

Salinski turned round sharply, as though stung. The gangsters were now standing in a row behind the table; a solid group in the halo of the golden light; a wall of unfriendly stares. They were united, at least for the moment.

Salinski did not lose his head. He gave a couple of sniffs, poking out his beard and wriggling his moustaches.

"So long, Mr. Antoni," he said in an almost normal tone. "But do tell Vaska to wash his socks: this place stinks like hell."

Just before Salinski drove out of the side road on to the highway he stopped the car by a clump of trees. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his moist forehead. The night was not cold; he was not sweating with the heat or with exertion. It was his fear oozing from him. He had concealed it successfully so far; but now, in the stillness and solitude, it overwhelmed him.

He switched off the lights. In his driver's seat he felt constrained, unsure, almost in danger. He got out and began to walk along a summer path, attended by the rustle of the old pine trees.

By nature he was inclined to be optimistic, to feel genuine admiration for himself and his own wisdom. But now his thoughts were anything but rosy. They did not roll smoothly along the orbit of his self-satisfaction, they broke away from the system of which he was the solar centre, so wrapped up in himself that he was an almost perfect clinical specimen of egotism. Now his thoughts swept down on him like vultures. They pecked into his mind angularly and painfully, stimulating his imagination, which normally was

not very active, but which worked vigorously in times of stress.

He cursed. His foot knocked against a preserve can, and he kicked it violently. It flew up, and fell on the road with a dull, empty clatter.

"That's what I should have done with them long ago," he thought. The whole gang should have been broken up twelve months before, or at the latest during the summer, when the 'Count' had begun to demoralize the others, working them up against Salinski. Other 'entrepreneurs', wiser than he, had organised a couple of 'jobs', had had their pickings and then had dispersed their gangs. In those difficult, uncertain times, when every day one survived was worth two or three times as much as any of the sluggish, pre-war days, brief but profitable activity was the ideal of every gangster, whether operator or executive.

Now it was too late. They had unmasked him, had discovered his real identity. He was no longer the mysterious, anonymous 'director'.

His feverish imagination began to play havoc with his nerves. He felt a cold shiver down his back. He remembered his 'medicine', went back to the car, took a bottle of cognac from under his seat, and had a good swig.

A moment or two later he was speeding along the highroad towards Warsaw. He got no pleasure out of the easy, undisturbed drive, which was broken only at the city bounds, where a German guard examined his night pass and let him through. He could not get his mind off that Milanowa hide-out. Every word of that ominous conversation came back to him, exaggerated by his fears for the future, or perhaps only now perceived in their true significance.

If he hadn't handed over the other thousand, what would have happened? He got off lightly this time, but what of the next? This most profitable of all his undertakings, which in two years had turned him into a potentate among the war-time wealthy, had suddenly become a burden too great

to be borne, crushing him to the ground.

He must cut himself free, must liquidate the entire business as quickly as possible. But how? The question returned again and again—he found no answer. But he must. He knew well enough what fate awaited him if he did not get the whip-hand of them: blackmail, ruin, or . . .

He shuddered, gripped the wheel more tightly, and stared into the darkness.

"In any case I must act at once," he was thinking as he went upstairs. "When Antoni himself . . ."

The door of his apartment was opened by the porter. Salinski looked automatically at the coat-rack hung with overcoats. 'Thirty at least; not too bad . . .' he thought.

"Have you anything to eat?"

"Supper is waiting for you, sir."

"Is my daughter in?"

"She has a guest; they're in the dining-room."

He gave the man his overcoat and took the case to his office, then went to the dining-room.

"Daddy, let me introduce you," Krystyna said, after kissing him. "We've got a new tenant, or rather, a guest; he's taking over Josef's room."

Salinski absently stretched out his hand to Marek. He did not catch the name. "Very pleased to meet you," he said.

"What times these are, my dear sir!" he added as he took his usual seat. "Always having to change your address. But you'll be quite safe with us. I'm always ready to help you people. I do all I can, and more."

The arrival of his supper saved him the necessity of continuing the stereotyped phrases he always used on such occasions. However, he was not lying; he was doing a great deal for the Underground movement: he, too, did conspiratorial work!

EVERY drinking place has its own distinctive soul. Warsaw had its many restaurants, its cafés, both bad and good, both expensive and cheap ; little nests for lovers, haunts for prostitutes, fences and pimps ; artistic confectioners ' , workers' dining-rooms with hamburgers and strong drink ; bars loaded with Polish specialities ; exquisite wine dives ; eating places attached to pork-butchers' shops. There are, there were, thousands of such places : every one different, every one distinctive, every one with its own ambitions, every one hospitable in its own manner. Every one with its own soul.

The soul of the ' Campfire ' Café was youth. Turbulent and daring, it overwhelmed Marek as he entered the small hall opening off the street. On a platform in one corner the Brodzinski Brothers were playing the last notes of a song being sung all over Warsaw : a song which was a challenge, confident against all the facts, banal, yet serious, as strong as life itself. A hundred youthful voices took it up fierily ; the commonplace lines expressed a feeling simple and mysterious, fragile yet indestructible. The soul of the ' Campfire ' Café was set free :

*" Once more the honeyed perfumes rise,
Once more our Warsaw is enjoyment ;
Once more our Warsaw spreads enchantment.
Throughout this night that throbs with sound,
Throughout this night make merry, Warsaw ;
Rejoice, exult in all your glory,
For we, your children, love you, Warsaw."*

A brief pause for breath, the saxophones gave the note, then again :

" make merry, Warsaw ;

*Rejoice, exult in all your glory,
For we, your children, love you, Warsaw."*

When it was ended silence fell : sudden, complete ; they were absorbed in themselves, in their sense of community, in the knowledge of kinship and love. Marek stood at the buffet and gazed into the smoky haze, at the youthful faces still lit up with the song ; at the eyes flaming with anger ; into that vortex of frenzied desires—impossible yet continually being achieved ; into the complex of life condensed almost into a pain ; into a world which was his own world—or had been until yesterday.

In front of him he saw two small tables placed together. A group of youngsters—five or six young men with gleaming white shirts and collars, broad, well cut jackets and long, patent leather shoes ; and two girls, very young, good-looking, but with the eyes of mature women. Marek recognized them all. He merely passed his glance over them and looked round for a free place.

" A table for me ! " he said curtly to the waiter.

Others in the hall had overheard him, noticed him, recognized him. A scraping, knocking of chairs being pushed away. " My bill ! . . " said very loud, contrasting with the silence that was slowly dissolving in the waves of renewed conversation. The group of youngsters rose from their tables. They went out : a line of faces turned away from him, mortally alien, youthfully petrified.

" So they know already," he thought. He felt a bitter taste in his mouth, a turmoil in his brain, emptiness, cold and clammy, in his heart. He sat down at one of the two vacant tables. A belated thought, painful, unrealistic, the last farthing he had in his treasury, knocked on his mind : " If they were under my command they wouldn't go wandering around in such a bunch."

He ordered some sorb-vodka. The waiter smiled at him as an old customer as he set down several glasses with the bottle.

"How many glasses for your friends?" he asked.

Marek blinked; he repelled the man with a look.

"Thank you, none at all."

Hubbub, laughter, joking and fun returned to the 'Campfire'. The orchestra finished its supper and tuned up again; in a moment another song would be roared out.

No one broke in on Marek's loneliness, no one disturbed his isolation. He sat there, one man occupying a whole table, amid a throng of people jostling for seats. The other, vacant chairs had long since been carried off elsewhere, the twin table had been shifted. He was alone, absolutely alone, in that crowded hall.

Even now he could not believe it; with an effort of will he passed his eyes over the faces: strangers, foreigners, not his people.

Another couple entered—surely these would . . . He stared at them openly, called them over to him with his eyes. They turned and went to the buffet. Possibly they hadn't noticed him; or else . . . or else they knew, like the others.

He sluggishly filled his glass, raised the amber fluid to his lips: bitterness, wormwood; surely it was faked, just hootch?

He put his elbows on the table, rested his head in his hands. It could not be said that he was thinking. Thoughts do not consist of shreds of pictures, of words that lash the eyes, scraps of phrases leaping at you from a judicial trial: his own; juridical paragraphs, formulae, all the legalistic trappings for human misfortune: failure to carry out orders'; "that, in time of war, in connection with and in the course of his military duties" . . . "he admits himself guilty of the crime . . ." "the court decides . . ."

They were not thoughts—those faces returning from that former road; those eyes like deep wells, today despaired, hateful, but always indifferent; nor those smiles, still so close; those sighs, those picturesque conversations, those

perfumed, accursed embraces ; nor those hands. Nor those voices, men's voices, once friendly, but now cold, repellent. Nor those definite orders.

He sat motionless, with eyes closed ; an islet of silence amid the babel of the hall. He had forgotten the hall, the half-empty glass, his own loneliness. He was not suffering, he no longer felt any pain. The nerves are numbed when their fibres are sealed with ice. He felt heavy, half dead, inwardly icy.

If it is not self-imposed, if it is the result of guilt, or of misfortune, loneliness never lasts long. Always someone arrives, something invades the solitude ; a comrade appears, or a counsellor, a confidant, a sympathetic fellow traveller. And so it was now. Someone came up to Marek, recognized him, put a hand on his shoulder.

Korda did not feel the touch, had no perception of the friend. Only at the second, more vigorous tug did he raise his head, to stare with vacant eyes. His facial muscles did not quiver—he refused to admit the unexpected surprise.

"What's all this, Mr. Marek ?" Salinski said, smiling rather coarsely, in half-joking concern. "Your vodka's going flat, and you sunk in thought ! Are you sick or in love ? And what vodka, too ! Sorb-vodka !" he went on, when Marek showed that he was in no hurry to reply. "May I sit down at your table ? This place is terribly crowded."

"By all means," Marek said without the least enthusiasm.

He tapped his ring on the base of his glass. Salinski seated himself comfortably in the chair the waiter brought. He poured himself out some vodka, and drank.

"Excellent ! First class !" he said, running his tongue over his thick lips.

"I've tasted worse," Korda muttered.

"Drown your sorrows in drink !" Salinski poured himself out some more. "Here's to you, young man ! I'm very glad I found you here."

He dammed his torrent of garrulity. His fat, but animated face adopted a serious expression ; his eyes seemed to be staring into gloom. Marek showed no interest in him whatever.

"It's a striking coincidence our meeting here today," Salinski began again, once more focusing his eyes on the details of the passing moment, on the face of the young man opposite him. "Just imagine : this is the first time I've ever been here, and I have this pleasant meeting !"

"Interesting, certainly," Marek muttered. He forced himself to reply in order not to offend Krystyna's father.

"I'm very fond of young people," the older man chattered, "I can't stand being alone. But you're off colour today." He looked at Korda with concern. Then he filled the glasses again.

"But I quite understand, I quite understand. I've got troubles of my own, for that matter. That's precisely why I've run away from my home. But please don't misunderstand me, it's not a family quarrel," he added hastily.

They went on drinking. Salinski grew more and more eloquent, though his confidences evoked no response. He dropped into an almost intimate tone.

"When I recall my own youth," he said, "I can never stop marvelling at the things that used to move me. All those youthful troubles—they're a trifles, believe me. Looking at you I think I'd readily exchange my one anxiety for all your worries. And I'd still smile."

"I don't think you'd gain on the exchange."

"But I would ; I would, young man. You've got all the future before you. To youth the world stands wide open. You young people are the hope of the nation ; society counts on you."

"Not on me !"

Marek pushed away his glass impatiently. With a nervous movement he reached for the ash-tray ; it struck him that he

hadn't smoked for an hour or more.

"What are you saying, Mr. Marek!" Salinski protested in an indignant tone. He even stopped pouring out the vodka in order to give his words more emphasis. In his cups he had a tendency to gesticulate and fall into patriotic pathos, in the manner of his generation. "I appreciate your modesty, and I esteem it, we all esteem it highly. I'm deeply moved by all the anonymity of heroism. Really I am!" he raised both hands, not so high and wide as a priest when blessing the faithful, but in a similar gesture. "But you cannot expect me not to visualize all the services you have rendered, all your responsibilities . . ."

"That's all past and done with," Marek snapped.

Though still not inclined for conversation, he did feel a little better. A spirit of perversity had been aroused in him, a desire to disillusion this kind-hearted old buffer.

"I'm not the man you take me for, my dear Mr. Salinski. I'm just a private individual, quite a private individual—since yesterday."

Salinski's eyes glittered like a signal mirror catching a beam of light. He had difficulty in restraining a gesture of mingled curiosity and satisfaction.

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

Marek did not reply. He drew away a little, leaned against his chair-back, stared into vacancy. He reached for his glass and poured the vodka down his throat.

"Pardon me!" he said, coldly and peevishly. "I don't inquire into your troubles, and I have no intention of talking about my own."

"But don't take offence, Mr. Marek. I'm old enough to be your father . . ."

He would have continued in this strain, but the waiter came up and politely reminded them that the curfew hour was near; it was 8.45, only fifteen minutes to go.

Salinski felt for his note-case. Korda stopped him:

"It's paid for."

"Pity, pity! After all, you're my guest. Well, let's finish it off and go." He picked up his glass. "Of course you're coming along to us tonight?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I was just thinking, I must thank you for all your hospitality. You really have been very kind to me."

Marek forced a smile, to efface the impression of his previous asperity; he was thinking now that he had been too impulsive. Salinski looked upset.

"Oh no, my dear sir; we shan't let you go so easily as that. Krystyna would be inconsolable. But d'you know what?" he changed his tone, evidently struck by a happy thought. "It's a pity to spoil such a pleasant evening; let's go along to the Alhambra, it's only a few steps from here."

Marek looked at him interrogatively.

"Don't you know the Alhambra? It's a sort of night club . . . a cabaret. Purely Polish, and illegal really, of course. When you come out they issue you with railway tickets, and then you can go home without fear of being arrested. It's a smart idea, don't you think? You simply mustn't refuse me!" Seeing that Marek was hesitating, he resorted to the drinker's argument: "I'm entitled to my revenge, you know."

"All right then; let's go," Marek said. He had made no other plans for the night, his one plan was to find oblivion in drink.

Amusement, like love, can be found even among ruins. And wartime Warsaw had its amusements. The 'Alhambra' flourished beneath the skeleton of the Philharmonic Hall, which had suffered from bombs and fire in September, 1939. Very few people knew of the underground resort, but there were sufficient to assure a considerable income to the management, and corresponding bribes to German officials. It was not open

to anybody who wished : the management had passwords, methods of selection, regulations, similar to those that covered all life in this secret, underground city.

The entrance to the ' Alhambra ' was through the former entry to the Caucasian Restaurant. Salinski went past a street door and tapped on a small window let into the wall : three brief taps, twice repeated. A face appeared behind the glimmering glass. Marek saw it only in outline : uncertain and mysterious, like a face on an over-exposed negative. Salinski put his head down to the window.

" Oh, it's the director," a voice said. " Okay !"

The door was opened and they passed through. The spectral porter closed it again at once, the automatic lock clicked. They went downstairs. Marek, already rather tipsy, thought those stairs would never come to an end.

Gloom, not a sound, the narrow tunnel of the stairs ; somewhere below them, very distant it seemed, a lamp was burning : a signpost to the underground world.

Marek followed Salinski, groping at the wall. He had the feeling that he was falling, he would surely stumble and fall into some horrible well. Anxiety swept over him like a breath of cold air. He stopped ; he might even have turned back but for a shadow barring the way : another guest, or the porter. He went on.

They passed along a dimly lighted corridor—very long and narrow, strangely dull, inexorable. They turned left through a doorway, and at once a negro rumba, a bristle of noise, weird and exotic, raging saxophones, swept over them.

A large hall, closed on the right by the orchestral platform and a circle of light-grained parqueting stained by three quivering couples ; straight ahead it passed into the brilliantly lit cavern of a small buffet bar ; on the left it appeared to be endless, floating in gloom and darkness, studded with the spangles of candles on small tables.

Salinsky led the way into that gloom. The spirit of

inebriety, still diffident at that early hour, peered at Marek from the faces of men and women, pale, unreal, most of them unknown to him, but familiar to his companion.

"Who's that?" he asked as they sat down at their table, after passing a group to whom Salinski had bowed with great respect. There were two middle-aged gentlemen and two ladies, elegantly dressed, already in the merry stage of intoxication, laughing with naked, provocative laughter.

"What? Don't you know? It's Colonel Giez and his adjutant. The women are somebody else's wives, of course. . . the husbands are in England. They're here almost every night. They're not the only members of the Command to be found here."

The waiter brought a candle for their table, and Salinski ordered a bottle of Martell. They set off on their road to oblivion. But Marek was not the driver.

"Just look at that fair-haired fellow," Salinski began, his eyes indicated a young man at the next table. "He reminds me of a mutual acquaintance of ours. Don't you think so? Krystyna said you knew Victor."

"Victor? The gangster? Yes, I did know him. I heard they'd killed him."

"My goodness! He died the death of a hero. In my arms. I took him in my own car to the cemetery, by night, to avoid arousing suspicion. . . thought Krystyna would have told you all about it. No? It's a very interesting story."

He began to describe Victor's last moments, colourfully and by no means truthfully, making plentiful use of patriotic phraseology. Korda was sunk in thought, his face set in concentrated expression. Salinski felt sure he was listening with great attention. "He must have had contacts with Victor," he thought, and decided to take a further step.

"Victor's case is symbolic," he ended. "It's a monument: a nameless, exalted example of fulfilment of duty. But I suppose you're surprised to find me so genuinely

interested in him?"

"No; why should I be?" Marek murmured. "I liked Victor too."

The conversation that followed was graven deep in Marek's memory. And with it the background, the 'Alhambra' with its sounds: irritating, as derisive as sneers; men and women clinging to one another in couples, in unnatural postures, apparently racked by convulsions, or moving slowly in the ecstasy of stupefaction; faces; the voices of drunken men, the lewd giggles of drunken women; and one face, one laugh, coming from abysmal depths, or from a fourth dimension. And his companion's face, reasonably clear to begin with in the light of the flaming candle, but later hazy, shapeless: a greasy stain amid the smoke, yet brisk and insistent, ejecting words, sentences; sometimes a long way off, almost fading in the gloom, at other times as large as a shining frying pan.

At times it vanished completely, leaving only a voice coming out of a void, usually vulgar and good-natured, sometimes patronizing, or passing into a confidential, mysterious whisper. Marek's ears caught the whisper most easily of all, especially when he grew more drunk.

"... over a woman," Salinski ended a sentence. "Of course I was innocent, but that scoundrel of an agent-provocateur was greatly trusted by all the Party. This was in 1910. The Party tribunal accepted the agent's accusations against me, and I had no witnesses. I was sentenced to be expelled from the Party. With infamy. Civil ostracism... public death."

"... public death," Marek repeated. He stared at the cognac in its crystal glass. "Public death... public..." the words drummed into his mind. "And why not physical death?" he asked himself. He could not tear his eyes away from the golden sparkle of the glasses glittering in the candle-light; he was always fascinated by the gleam of bullets.

"And yet," Salinski went on, "it turned out all right in the end. Losiak was denounced as an agent of the Tsarist Secret Police, and a year later I was completely rehabilitated. I was elected to the party district committee. And then . . ."

Marek was not listening. His face had gone queerly ashy, his features were rigid in the clutch of some importunate thought, they ceased to reflect the succession of his impressions and moods, and were frozen in the mask of death.

This was the moment Salinski had been waiting for. He laid his hand over the young man's hand lying inertly beside the glittering glass.

"Mr. Marek," he said, "you mustn't give way like that."

Korda snatched his hand out of the friendly clasp. He flung himself back, thrust the table away.

"Leave me in peace," he snapped.

"That's just what I'm concerned about: your peace. Your nerves, your bearing. Society . . . we all count on you, on such people as you. We feel safer when we've got you in front of us."

"A delusion, Mr. Salinski." Marek suddenly came to life. "Please don't rely on my shoulders; they're no longer any protection to you."

"But . . ."

"No 'buts', my dear sir."

He started up, set his palms on the table and, bending over towards Salinski, staring at his upturned face, he spat out emphatically, with the vehement passion of despair, or anger:

"A sentence of a field court-martial has flung me outside the pale of society. If you leave me in peace you'll save yourself the trouble of paying me undeserved compliments. You'd do better to address them to others. Good-bye."

He turned to go out. But the entrance to the hall seemed obscured by a black mist. He was unable to see his road, his objective; he did not even know his direction. Except,

perhaps, that one, final road : simple and honourable. He instinctively felt under his jacket, but his fingers failed to find what they were groping for : the floor rose on end, a whirling vortex flung him back into his chair. He clutched with his right hand at the table edge. He breathed heavily, his unseeing, filmy eyes sought something in the darkness. Salinski studied him carefully as he sat opposite. " He's all ready," he thought. He mentally rubbed his hands. He did not disturb his companion : he was preparing a further advance.

Even when the young man shook himself out of his daze and seated himself more naturally in his chair, the older man remained silent. He gazed at Marek gravely and thoughtfully from behind a veil of discreet sympathy. He made himself comfortable in his chair and began in a whisper, leaning across till his face was close to the face of the man he was seeking to ensnare, whom now he had all but caught.

" My dear sir, I know life too well to talk banalities, cheap expressions, comforting but unrealistic. The matter's serious ; that's quite clear. Please don't interrupt . . ." he forestalled Marek's impatient gesture. " I've got no intention of questioning you, I'm not interested in the details. You're in a jam, I can see, and a dangerous one. But there's always a way out, there's always room for commonsense. Here we are in the fourth year of the war. You haven't survived all the past simply to do something stupid at this stage, when a new wind is blowing."

Marek mechanically reached for his glass. Salinski took advantage of the interruption. He stopped, and they both had a drink.

" I've been young too," he picked up his thread. " I've done some idiotic things in my time. I've known what it is to be all on edge, over-sensitive ; I know what thoughts we get at times. Yes, I repeat : you're in a dangerous, a tragic situation. But for that very reason I've no intention of

abandoning you. I believe in you," he added emphatically.

He brought his face very close to Marek's suffering face, and stared at him with glittering eyes.

He drew back his head, still holding his companion in the strange power of his gaze—strong in the other's weakness, armed with Marek's misfortune. He stretched out his hand in a magnanimous, brotherly gesture. Korda did not draw away his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Marek, I believe in you. I'll help . . ."

The voice suddenly died away, was lost in the darkness together with the face and the form. A vortex swept Marek away. Or rather, it did not sweep him away, it suddenly revealed itself to him, swung into his field of vision. The quivering couples started up from the parquet; after them went the orchestra with the languid melody of the tango; then the waiters, the tables; the bar rushed in pursuit of the swirling figures as though drawn by a magnet; the processional dance extended in a long, luminous streak, snatching up little groups of tipplers, the legs belonging to Colonel Giez, the dark dress on some red-haired woman; now it was the turn of the lamps, the candles, of glittering objects—even the glasses were swept from the table to speed into the pulsing vortex; and Salinski's face, sweating, pierced by two eyes blind though gleaming; the entrance door went swinging up. A whirling ring of legs, face, dress suits and dinner-jackets, white breasts and silver saxophones, in a hoop of light formed by the bar, the candles, the ceiling. They all flew past him leftward, faster and faster, one enormous spinning disc, vivid, momentarily swelling, spurting with successive rings of colours, vague at first, but clearer and clearer, until each ring, each colour was perfectly distinct. Now the movement could no longer be perceived: the ring seemed to be motionless. Only in its very heart and centre something quivered. A face . . . whose face? emerged in the very middle of all: now it was all: the principle, the agony, the force whirling that circle.

“ Ha-ha-ha ! Ha-ha-ha ! ” Maria’s laugh broke through the ring of the vicious circle, flooded out in great gusts, disintegrated the stream of colours, spurted in all directions in plumes of white sparks : “ Ha-ha-ha ! Ha-ha-ha ! ”

“ Mr. Marek, what’s the matter ? ” The whisper came from nowhere, or maybe from beyond the rings of that vortex, which now slowed down, came to a halt, only to set off again in the other direction.

“ Mr. Marek ; Mr. Marek ! ”

The rainbow of colours went dull and grey, spokes radiated from the centre ; the glitter of light fell away, broke up into separate shapes in the lamps of the bar, the chandeliers, the flames of the candles, in bottles, glittering eyes, gems on a stout lady’s neck. The silver saxophones returned to their platform ; the dress suits, the brilliant attire, the crimson of gleaming lips returned to the hall. One further full circle, half a circle, a quarter : the chairs, the small tables, the shaking couples grew distinct and were restored to their places. And this face is there too, the last face, mixed up with the colonel’s shoulders ; his face is here . . . and his hand . . . Ah . . . all right.

“ I’m all right now, all right . . . I had a momentary blackout.”

A greenish moon peered in through the windows of the casino. It had crossed the river from the East, had entered the city, had climbed high above the University, above St. Roch’s Hospital ; it had leapt across the inner suburbs of the south-east, and now from the south it was gazing along the city’s main arteries, along Marszalkowska Street and across the Saxon Gardens ; along Ujazdowska Avenue, Krakowskie Street, and over the Castle. In Krakowskie it poured down a flood of greenish light, throwing a shadow across the road from the statue of Copernicus, bending the shadows of the trees northward, arraying them in order like

soldiers. It found the casino deserted ; with streaks of light it scrutinized the tables, fettered the chairs. It groped at the baccarat table, and painted a pattern of its own on the lawn of the carpet. One beam it sent to the girl sitting at the window.

A stillness, empty and green. Krystyna gazed at the moon. The oppressive day had passed, leaving a dead emptiness. Not weariness, not fear, not even relaxation after the rush of excessively violent sensations. Simply a void—like yesterday, like a month ago, a year ago. We all know that void : the negative aspect of energetic life, the interior of 'he bell that rings to the beat of a violently quivering heart, a heart that is empty and quiet at times of rest.

But now something approached, something emerged from the depths ; bubbles floated and soared, reflecting former years, deep memories.

Her room when she was a child ; a soft, small bed ; her mother's hand, her mother's voice, telling all about the Glass Mountain, the Snow Queen, gypsy fortune-tellers and elves floating on a sea of words. A fairy-tale colourful at first, then fading into the green, the green of eyes . . .

Now there was no hand, nor fairy-story, nor caress ; her mother had departed long since. All that was left was the moon and a light as green as then—and eyes : eyes seen above a pistol barrel ' At Basia's ', bold, and fine, green, yes, of course they were green.

The film-strip of the past day veiled all else, sped rapidly past her eyes.

" You do nothing but talk about him, only about him. And yet he's almost as bad as a criminal ; you know yourself what he did." Wanda's face, her hard words, as they sat in a café. (" I never did like Wanda really, she's shallow ; in fact she's plain stupid.")

A sudden shot in the street outside ; another ; then two more. A guttural ' Halt ! ' ripped through Krystyna's mournful thoughts, swept away her friend Wanda's fate. The

void was filled once more, her heart set the bell ringing again, in alarm, in anxiety for her father.

"Stop worrying!" her commonsense told her. "He always carries a night pass or railway tickets; he can manage the Germans . . ." "I think I gave her a good lesson," her mind returned to Wanda and the unpleasant conversation. "I expect she'll be ringing me up tomorrow—but I'll be out!"

"What was it she said?" She strained to recall her friend's words, painful, but typical, expressing the thoughts of many, perhaps of all who were engaged in Underground work. She unwound the ribbon of time; through the green light, through the eyes of a young man she returned to the café, to the girl guzzling her rich pastries.

"Why aren't you eating?" Wanda had asked.

"I'm feeling sad; I was here with him the day before yesterday."

"A fine thing! Today thousands of human beings are being murdered in Oswiecim death-camp, and you're worrying over one young man! They didn't sentence him without good reason: think how many of our people the Germans caught."

"Facts, facts!" Krystyna was thinking. "This isn't a matter of facts; the important thing here is the intention. It's all that bitch's fault—that horrible black she-devil. You've got to take the heart into account. Good intentions, and the heart." Krystyna knew that heart, she had seen it, had discerned it through those kindly eyes, as green as the old-time fairy-tale, as the moonlight draped over the city.

The hour of emptiness passed, the pain returned, the yearning, the girlish sorrow. She began to weep. The words of a letter, his letter, danced through the tears: "Thank you for your friendship and kindness . . . I cannot take advantage any longer of your father's and your hospitality . . ."

Another cry in the street—far off, muffled by the distance and her own tears. Then steps, close at hand; probably the porter going to the gate. Now she saw Gabriel's

face, heard Gabriel's voice : " Miss Krystyna, crying is not allowed. He's not worthy of your tears." Those words came back from that fatal yesterday : they were part of an official conversation.

" Crying isn't allowed . . . crying isn't allowed," she repeated to herself, and was carried away by her sobbing. It's easy enough to give orders . . .

" God, don't abandon Marek !" the prayer burst through her weeping, her weeping became a prayer : the genuine, good prayer, uncommercial, impersonal. She was not praying for herself, nor for a husband or a lover. Not even entirely for a young man, not exclusively for Marek. Her sorrow grew wings—the pain of life, loathing for the world. The flame rose to heaven : not an oil lamp before a quiet altar, but burning with her own premature, guiltless suffering.

From the corridor a light filtered into the room : brutal, unfriendly, cadaverous in its hue. She did not notice it, she did not hear the footfalls on the heavy pile carpet. A dull thud on the floor, a hiss of pain underlined with a curse. An alien element burst into the stillness, entangled the greenish streaks of light. A ponderous blotch hurried across to the window.

" Aren't you in bed yet, child ?" her father's hand rested on her head.

" I've been waiting for you, Daddy ; I felt anxious about you."

" Quite unnecessarily, my dear ; your daddy has a night pass. Always remember that if anything detains me in town. But now draw the curtains, I must switch on the light. So many chairs have been left littered about that I've knocked my leg. Do the black-out, my child."

Krystyna wiped her face with her handkerchief, guarding her eyes against the light seeping in through the window. A rolling clatter of the roller blind, then a second, a third : the beams of moonlight were cut off, and with them the green,

the fairy story, and the green eyes too—all that sorrowful, singular moment of time.

Darkness ; another hiss of pain :

“ Damn it, where’s that switch ? Hell ! Ah, I’ve got it ! ”

The light revealed Marek at the door. He blinked, ran his eyes over the hall, over the chairs and tables, and rested them on Krystyna at the window ; she sat perfectly still, staring at him, apparently listening to something.

Salinski raised his leg and set his foot on a chair ; he rubbed the painful spot.

“ Krystyna,” he glanced at his daughter ; “ what’s the matter with you tonight ? Take Marek into the dining-room and give him some coffee. We’re leaving early in the morning ; I’ve come to a business arrangement with him.”

16

THE HUM of the engine made Marek feel drowsy, especially as at first Salinski, wholly absorbed in manœuvring his car through the military convoys, the civilian traffic, with watching and passing the lights at the cross-roads, did not talk at all. The young man went off into brief dozes, tormenting and chaotic, as heavy as the preceding day, as the night and all this journey. He had a feeling that something had happened that he had got involved in something or other. Exactly what in, he didn’t know, and didn’t trouble himself in the least. His head was still fuddled with drink, his eyes were sleepy, his ears filled with a roaring noise.

When they had passed the city bounds Salinski slowed down and took out his cigarettes.

“ Listen, young man ! ” he began, after assuring himself

that Korda was smoking, listening, understanding. "I propose to entrust you with a certain piece of work, rather difficult and dangerous."

He drove slowly, talking as he drove. At first only certain of his words reached Marek's ears; the others were lost in space, fled back along the highroad. "... business ... you must help me ... I'm not a philanthropist."

A sudden jolt presented him with the adjective: 'private'; then there was a gap, another blank before his eyes. They passed a light carriage; then came the noun: 'initiative'. Korda shook off his drowsiness and listened more and more closely.

He was a little surprised to find the older man calling him by his Christian name. "We must have drunk to brotherhood," he thought. He realized that many of the night's events had failed to register in his memory.

"Money, money," Salinski was saying. "The biggest affairs have gone to pieces through lack of resources. I know that well enough, I've always had a good deal to do with the material lining of life, as a banker, a financier, and a company director."

He turned to the left, and accelerated; the highroad was smooth and easy, facilitating their progress, inciting to fast travelling.

"Fortune came easily to my hands, I gathered it in for my family, for my children. But when they tortured my son to death in Oswiecim I decided to act. To avenge him, to do something to help towards the victory."

He glanced at Marek, slowed down, and continued:

"I'm too old for active work myself. I'm not fond of politics, but I know the value of money much better than the generals and politicians. I began to pour money into Underground Poland: my own money, made at the expense of the Germans, and out of Polish profiteers too; in my casino, for instance, which some people find fault with. But all that

was still not enough. You reckon up just how much money goes on the officers' pay for just one detachment. And the equipment? And propaganda: all your secret newspapers, brochures, bulletins? It's a bottomless pit—you know that well enough without my telling you."

"Of course," Marek said. "But then London . . ."

"Inadequate, quite inadequate," Salinski interrupted. "So I decided to act on my own initiative. I started my own group."

Marek pricked up his ears. But Salinski had to stop talking: a herd of cows was wandering along the road. The hoot of the car horn, the shouts of drovers, the phlegmatic sluggishness of the calmly chewing animals.

"What did you say?" Marek asked, when they had nosed their way through the living barrier. "Private initiative? But that's contrary to regulations. Our authorities . . ."

"Regulations! Authorities! Live a little longer, young man, and you'll realize the true meaning of words, and how many facets life has in this best of all possible worlds. You yourself have had some experience of these authorities and regulations, even though you are a good Pole."

"That's different. You can't . . ."

"Don't interrupt! I'm not fighting the authorities and I'm not breaking the regulations. At any rate I'm working in accordance with their spirit. When I pay money over to the High Command they don't ask me where I got it from. If I were to be caught by the Germans, Underground Poland wouldn't raise a finger. And I'd have no claim on them: I'm operating on my own, at my own risk, though it is for them, not for myself. Just anonymity, the ordinary sense of duty—I hate big words and loud talk. There are many such groups; whole organizations are living by expropriation of the Germans."

"I know that," Marek said. "It's a well-known story. Only I don't see very clearly how I come into all this."

He suddenly realized that they had already driven some distance out of Warsaw. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Milanowa. The people I spoke of are there. I must tell you a little about them: they're a peculiar type. Not angels, of course. And not idealists: they work for their pickings; I pay them well. More than one of them has got a nice little nest-egg. But, you know, I like professionals, and in this work you have to use professionals, putting them to the job they know."

"That's plain banditry," Marek said curtly. He drew back to the window and scrutinized Salinski. "You must excuse me, but I'm not the least bit interested."

The older man started angrily, stopped the car at the roadside, and said ironically and forcefully:

"Banditry, you say? Banditry? But what was Victor? You knew him. And who is prepared to guarantee the kind of subordinates you had in your own squad? Did you examine their personal records, their documents in the Military Intelligence Department?" He laughed outright, with genuine satisfaction.

"Bandits? They're all right in their way. I certainly didn't go into the details of my five men's past, though I'm sure they weren't monks."

"But in any case, tell me, Marek, what are you really concerned with? With words, with empty phrases, or with work: definite and necessary work, I would even say organic, though not particularly impressive work."

Korda was abashed. "The old boy's right," he thought. After the strain on his attention he was again overcome with weariness. He felt terribly isolated; nothing seemed to matter. He leaned his head against the window glass.

"All right," he said. "But . . ."

Salinski started up the engine. For some time they drove along without speaking.

"The whole point is," he said at last, "that the work's

going to pieces. The brotherhood's got out of hand. Their chief—a fellow named Antoni—and 'Tec' . . ."

" 'Tec' ?"

" It's his nickname ; he was in the police once. I'm having trouble with them : they've found out my name. I kept it secret because of Krystyna : she'd be worried if she knew everything. But now it's beginning to smell like blackmail to me." He broke off, as if reluctant to stir up mud. They had reached Milanowa.

" Anyway, you'll see for yourself," he ended as he turned down a side road. " You must take them by the throat."

He set Marek down and drove on to the garage, which lay to the left of the house. Marek had time to take a good look at ' Villa Melania '. Built of boarding in the usual summer villa style, but neglected and abandoned to the elements, it stood among half-naked trees and overgrown bushes, as though ashamed of its own decline. Two young maples stood guard over the main gate, sprinkling the sadness of their yellowing leaves about the drive and the lawn ; an ash, sickly, weary of life and the soil, clung with bare branches to the verandah ; the autumn wind blew capriciously among the pines huddled together at the rear. A loose window on the first floor knocked against the edge of the roof, returned reluctantly to its warped frame and burst up again, as though planning to flee to the road and the surrounding woods. " What a filthy hole !" Marek thought.

Unwilling to hang about waiting for Salinski, he went to the wicket gate linking the garage drive with the villa. It was locked. He clambered up the palings and got over them with an adroit heave, but not without damage. He had set one foot on the crossbar of the palings ; now he examined his boots irritably, with exaggerated attention : a protruding nail had scratched one leg. The long, clean tear would never be erased by polish, it would remain as the reminder of an unpleasant moment, or perhaps as a warning . . .

A key grated in the lock of the wicket gate. As Salinski came through he found Marek standing there, lost in thought, in the grip of superstitious irresolution.

"Come on!" the older man broke the spell with an energetic remark.

They went to the kitchen door. Marek allowed himself to drift. He had not thought out any plan, had not reflected on the steps he should take. With an instinctive, habitual reaction he felt for his pistol butt.

Salinski knocked. After a moment or two Vaska opened the door. In one hand he had a billet of wood: evidently he was lighting a stove. He welcomed Salinski with a quite friendly, grumbling murmur; Marek he scrutinized with vigilant eyes.

"Everybody in?" Salinski asked.

"Yes, boss. They're still asleep."

"Wake them up and tell them to come into the salon."

The gangsters drifted into the large room where Salinski had had his last, unsatisfactory meeting with them. Antoni was the first to arrive, as polite and theatrical as ever; then 'Tec', looking gloomy; finally the 'Count', buttoned right up, fresh and smelling like a perfumier's. Alek came down later, when general conversation had already begun; he had been sleeping upstairs by the sub-machine-gun.

Each of them studied Marek inquisitively but discreetly as he sat silent at the table, opposite Salinski. None of them questioned his right to be there. Observing the custom of their profession, while realizing the importance of the moment they left the initiative to their chief. Antoni knew the procedure well: he knew that essential matters would be brought up right at the end, would emerge out of desultory talk, which none the less must be carried on sedately, slowly, with dignity and unction. That is the way of people bound with one another by blood or earth: Polish peasants, or gangsters.

" Vaska, give our guests some vodka," Antoni opened the conversation.

" A homœopathic remedy !" Marek thought. But he had found the journey rather chilly, so he readily emptied his glass despite the night's debauch. Salinski only touched the strong stuff with his lips. The ' Count ' came to life at once. With his vodka he nibbled at some sausage Alek brought down, then turned to his basic occupation : polishing his nails.

" What's the news of the war, director ?" Antoni asked. " Are they smashing us ?"

" Things aren't too bad. The Soviets have captured Zhitomir ; Kiev will fall any day now."

" D'you hear, Vaska ? The Soviets are coming," ' Tec ' remarked.

The giant turned from the stove, which he had just finished loading with fuel. His freckled face betrayed no interest whatever—apparently he had not heard what Salinski was saying. The director went on unhurriedly : he knew he would have to sit here for half an hour or so. He spared his throat, and doled out the news in niggardly doses.

" Hamburg had a good bashing yesterday ; Berlin has had it three nights running. Bremen and Lubeck too."

" But what's the news from Warsaw ?"

" Not very cheerful : round-ups, executions. Things are certainly more restful here in Milanowa."

Thus began the social conversation which not one of them cared about, yet which was as indispensable as the dress suit at a diplomatic reception. Human affairs cannot do without conventions, established routines of custom and tradition. Even Marek's silence was in accordance with the situation : he was the unknown, the question mark, to which the answer would be provided sooner or later. He felt that, and took up his rôle easily enough. He did not talk. His face wore the mask of concentration which Gabriel had frequently observed during joint operations. He had learnt already that indiffer-

ence and boredom are highly esteemed by the simple-minded : in their eyes they become signs of authority and importance. Knowing they were watching him, he avoided too open glances, though he succeeded in deciphering the secret writing on their faces.

"The youngster's the best of the bunch," he thought, as he sent a pencil of smoke up towards the ceiling. "The 'Count's' a time-server and ham actor ; Antoni will kick ; 'Tec's' a fighter, but he might be dangerous." Vaska he summed up as a killing-machine. "Oil him with vodka ; and he's better without dough."

"But here we are chatting away," Salinski said at last, when the vodka was down almost to the bottom of the bottle, "and I've got to get back. Damn it, it's already half past nine." He glanced at his old-fashioned pocket-watch, and got up.

He took a step or two towards the door, but halted beside Antoni, who rose with the intention of seeing him off.

"Mr. Antoni, this gentleman will be remaining," he said, pointing to Marek. "See that he's made comfortable. He must have the downstairs back room, looking out on to the garden."

Now all eyes were openly turned on the young man. 'Tec' and Alek got up. The 'Count' stopped manicuring his nails, put his file in his pocket and stared at the stranger with a queer smile, of sympathy, of commiseration, perhaps of respect. Vaska stood gaping.

"You'll help Mr. Marek in running the work," Salinski told Antoni. "He's a very energetic fellow, he'll take over everything. I shall be coming out more rarely in future. You'll hand everything over to him. So long !"

He shook hands with Marek, nodded to the band like a kind-hearted general saying good-by to his staff, and went out in absolute silence, with nobody to see him off.

Korda remained standing for some seconds under the

concentric fire of five pairs of eyes, in an intolerable, prickly atmosphere of silence.

"What are you staring at like an idiot?" Antoni unexpectedly snapped at Vaska. His face flamed. Crimson, with a blue vein standing out on his forehead, he ran to the submissive Russian and began to tug at him by his unbuttoned wind-cheater.

"Step on it, you Russian swine! Show the gentleman his room."

Marek and Vaska went out, followed by tense stares. Marek's form seemed to hold their gaze with invincible, magic power. Even after the door had closed behind him the silence continued, and eight staring eyes, accentuated by dilated pupils, bored the white boards, piercing them, following after the unexpected intruder.

'Tec' poured some vodka into his glass and tossed it off in one gulp.

"Game but young," he said philosophically.

"That's the way it goes," the 'Count' replied, putting his right hand into one pocket, and raising the left to his eyes, to examine the polish on his nails.

"We'll play a hand for the honour of putting him out. Okay?" he added, speaking to no one in particular.

Alek shrugged his shoulders and picked up an overturned chair: he had no liking for Antoni.

17

LIFE IN Villa Melania flowed along smoothly, more easily than Marek had expected. There was no sabotage of his command, though he introduced new order and almost

military discipline.

His first step was to take stock of their armoury. The gang had two hand automatics—a Bren and a Bergman—three Schmeisser automatic pistols, and revolvers. He supervised the cleaning and oiling of the weapons and added to the store of ammunition, which the others had not troubled about, declaring that “they weren’t going to war.” Now even the ‘Count’ had to take a turn at work: in the house and the town, making purchases and arranging transport.

Drunkenness was cut down, the girls who had begun to hang around the villa were driven off for security reasons, and, too, because of the hate Marek had come to feel for all women. He introduced guards and duties as in a normal military unit. Vaska volunteered to sleep regularly by the Bren gun in the garage, and night guards were posted upstairs, to stand by the other light automatic. He saw to it that the house was put in order, and arranged for a supply of fuel for the winter. He persuaded Salinski to buy a light truck.

Of all the gang, Alek and Vaska proved most amenable to discipline and work. In Alek Marek felt that he had found a genuine friend, but he treated the former Wlasow man as a domestic animal, useful and strong, and deserving of the wise husband-man’s care. The ‘Count’ was polite to the new boss, sought his favour, sometimes tried his tongue at flattery. ‘Tec’s’ behaviour was perfectly correct, and so was Antoni’s, though Marek sometimes caught him giving him an evil look. And occasionally, when he entered the gangsters’ room unexpectedly their conversation broke off and there was an awkward silence.

He was not worried by these petty indications of dislike, as an officer in the army he had come across similar reactions. He knew that subordinates rarely have a good word to say for their superior officers.

Psychologically he was in better shape: he had a command again. He began to believe in the value of this new work,

especially as Salinski, whom he saw from time to time, hinted at the possibility that his sentence would be reviewed and he would be completely rehabilitated. Now all his thoughts and activities were concentrated on the command of his 'partisan detachment', as he liked to think it. He read a little, but spent much more of his time considering and planning risky exploits.

His first 'job' with the garg was carried out late in December.

Skalmierzycka Street is a quiet road, only partly built up. Of an evening it was completely deserted, especially in the winter, when snow had fallen. Then traffic came almost to a standstill. But not quite, for the postal vans took that route in their journeys to and from the Western Railway Station. Anyone could find out the times at which they drove through the street, if it was of any interest.

Skalmierzycka Street, the Kopinska Street corner. A broken-down light truck blocking the road. Two men busy at a wheel: old acquaintances, Antoni and 'Tec'. Marek was waiting on the other side of the road, opposite Kopinska Street, round the corner of a small house. Vaska was posted ahead of the truck, Alek with the Schmeisser was lurking opposite Korda, at the junction of the two streets.

Skalmierzycka Street was deserted; it was not very cold, but snow was falling monotonously and thickly. It settled on Marek's cap, on his arms and shoulders; it was clinging and damp, and he could not tell whether it was really white, for darkness had fallen.

He glanced at his watch: five-ten. The van should be along at any moment now. A queer anxiety pounded beneath his ribs, pulsed in his arteries, dried his tongue, palate, and throat.

"What's the matter with me?" he wondered. He had never felt anything of this kind before, not even when carrying

out the most dangerous tasks. Neither in the Solec Street battle, nor at Pruszkow, when he had led a squad in releasing prisoners, nor on so many other occasions. True, he had known a slight attack of nerves at times, but it had always been more mental than physical, quickening his vigilance, and so salutary. And it had always given place to sang-froid, to clarity of thought, to precision in the movements of his mind and body. "So what's the matter with me today?" He shook the snow off his cap, but he could not shake off the feeling.

"Hell! I wish it had started!" He strained his eyes into the damp, whirling darkness. He saw no light whatever. But words came to him: words someone had said, words he had heard or read, yesterday perhaps, certainly very recently: 'Private initiative'.

Salinski's face came to the aid of his memory; then Gabriel's form like a half-waking dream, with his back turned, walking away, almost a stranger, non-existent so far as Marek was concerned. 'Private initiative!' he repeated Salinski's euphemism. "This isn't the same as my previous work."

A quiet whistle ahead of him snapped the thread of memory. Vaska had signalled the 'alert'.

A feeble glimmer of light was approaching. It brightened for a moment, faded, then grew distinct again: a twinkling shield full of white dust caught in the funnel of the headlight. The postal van was trying out the road, carving through the snow and the evening.

Now the driver had caught sight of the obstacle. The brakes went on with a screech, the van stopped. A powerful light pierced the whirling flakes, broke away from the van, and picked out the two men bent over the wheel.

"What's up here?" Marek heard an angry voice in German. He clearly saw the dark mass of the postal van on the road. Now it could be seen even more clearly: Antoni had shone the light of his torch directly on to it. All well; now it was Marek's turn.

He dashed over to the van, almost colliding with the military escort who had been riding beside the driver ; the man jumped down to the road at that very moment.

" Hande hoch !" Marek shouted, pointing his revolver at the retreating form. Strange : he did not fire, despite his physical readiness and the rules of the fight.

A moment later he caught the faint crash of the door at the rear of the van, then shots, half drowned in the noise of the gang's own engine : ' Tec ' had driven off, taking the truck out of danger. As Marek ran to the rear, rather farther than was necessary to take up his agreed position, he caught the flash of a torch on the right-hand side. It was the signal for Vaska to begin.

Lurking in a safe niche, Korda listened to the course of the brief struggle. Three chaotic bursts from light automatics—then another, and another—a bullet whistled past him ; the German convoy was firing at random, with no knowledge of the position of their attackers. From the beginning their defence was hopeless. At any moment now the decisive knock-out blow would be coming. And here it came : a leaping, crimson tongue of fire. Vaska's Bren gun opened up in a long, deep burst, zigzagging to and fro across the van, tearing through its boards, piercing the sheet-steel, sowing destruction and death. Chaos, a ringing in the ears ; the street echoing with whistles. A groan, the soft thud of a body, the report of a burst tyre. Vaska stopped.

Now Alek opened from his side, at the engine and the driver, with the contralto note of his automatic pistol, very expertly, and obviously at close quarters : only a couple of bullets pecked at the wall behind which Marek was sheltering. Vaska drummed away again, then Alek : a beautifully harmonized duet.

Korda was about to call the ' cease fire ', but at that moment he caught a new, quite unnecessary note. He listened carefully, and counted : nine shots fired from a

large calibre pistol, coming from the farther side of the van, and bouncing on the sidewalk almost under his nose, in the exact spot where he would have been if he had taken up his proper station at the beginning of the action. They were clearly intended for him. They shook him up, quickened his intuition : he mentally fixed the timing and position of the pistol, caught the significance of the deed : " Antoni !"

" Cease fire !" he shouted.

Silence fell : the silence of sudden agony and death. Three Germans were lying on the road, the driver had crumpled to the floor of the cabin. Alek checked up on him, shining his torch down on the body.

' Tec ' drove up swiftly, and expertly backed the truck to the rear of the van.

A swift examination and selection of the captured mail. Alek shone his torch, Antoni picked up the sacks under Korda's watchful eyes. With a sharp knife he ripped the canvas ; five sacks were emptied into the darkness of the night, committing Christmas greetings, letters, money orders to the mercy of the wind and the snow. Two other sacks were flung unopened into the truck ; they jangled metallicly —boxes filled with notes.

" Vaska, you go and ride beside ' Tec ', " Marek ordered. He himself jumped into the back of the truck, with Alek and Antoni. The engine started up, and they plunged into the snowstorm. They soon reached the city bounds, taking an unguarded side-road which only someone as expert as ' Tec ' could have travelled along. By a roundabout route through the blinding snow they came out on the highroad to Milanowa.

Marek sat silently on one of the postal bags. He did not hear Antoni muttering to himself, nor Alek's excited estimates of the value of the loot. He felt no pleasure in the success of the job. Even the shake-up of his narrow escape from death had passed almost without a trace. He was left with a queer feeling of heartburn, of intangible bitterness, a

strange lack of satiation, and an all-pervading weariness, not with effort but with life.

He closed his eyes and turned his face towards the driving snow, which massaged his skin with a thousand moist fingers. Other roads and other journeys sped through his memory, and faces yesterday very close and dear, but now departing into oblivion.

A metallic click brought him back to the reality. He had not been mistaken : Antoni was changing the magazine of his automatic pistol.

“ And that’s for you, you skunk ! ”

Antoni’s body fell face downward over the table ; his right hand stretched out, in the spasm of his death-agony, towards the pile of banknotes as though even in death the gangster was fighting for his share. His stumpy, spade-shaped fingers clutched twice at the air, then straightened out and went rigid as he breathed his last. Marek had shot him through the heart, firing at a distance of two paces.

“ Why did I kill him ? ” he reflected when it was all over, as he lay in bed in the darkness. Salinski had returned to Warsaw long since, taking three-quarters of the loot with him. The rest had been divided up among the four gangsters. Marek did not take any for himself, and the director had sufficient tact not to force this form of ‘ official remuneration ’ upon him.

“ You’re quick on the draw,” was all he had said to Marek when the gangsters carried Antoni’s body out to the car, to dump it on the highroad.

“ He tried to kill me while we were on the job.”

So he had replied to Salinski. Now he was thinking : “ I acted in self-defence. And as the commander, in the interests of the detachment . . . ” he found a still better reason. “ And anyhow, what’s the point of arguing about

it . . . dogs like Antoni . . .” He did not feel, he had no reason to feel any qualms. And yet he could not get to sleep. “Nerves,” he assured himself. “Pre-war prejudices . . .”

After all, had he done so little in the way of killing? On his pistol butt he had fifteen notches marking executions, quite apart from shootings during collective operations and under orders—puffs blowing out the candles on a Christmas tree.

He closed his eyes. He did not sleep, it was rather a doze that came upon him. His consciousness freed from the everyday, waking control, he was in two places at once, in two phases of reality. The events of the share-out at Milanowa were mingled with others; the shot at Antoni blended with another shot, the first he had been called upon to fire in his Underground work. A shot at a local Polish-born German.

The gangsters' faces, their greedy stares bursting the iron of the postal boxes even before the locks were smashed, then fondling every packet of banknotes; the director with crimson patches on his cheeks, the same feverish glitter in his eyes. “You share them out,” he had told Marek . . .

. . . “Please, will the gentlemen wait? Daddy won't be long.” He had taken the pretty, curly-haired child on his knees. “What's your name?” he had asked her. “Hannah!” the fair-haired girl had replied, fluttering her little hands; her right hand wandered under the edge of his broad jacket and touched cold iron. “And what's this, please?”

“‘Tec!’ ‘Count!’ Alek!” Three packets of banknotes flew into the hands of the gangsters gathered round the table. “And that's for Vaska.”

“ . . . You want me, gentlemen? . . . Yes, my name is Lundiss. Hannah, my dear, come over to me . . . Oh, it doesn't matter, we can talk here; the child won't be in the way.” The rustle of unfolded paper, not of banknotes, but of a court judgment. “What's this? I don't understand . . .”

" But how about me ?" Antoni speaking . . . " But gentlemen, what is this for ? . . . "

The five-year old girl stares down at her father's body with great, inquisitive eyes. She is not frightened : she is interested in the foam on the blue lips . . . " And that's for you, you skunk !"

" I killed them because I had to," so Marek concluded.

" You had to ?" The sudden question did not come from outside him, so it must have sprung from the depths of his own being.

" That first man was a traitor ; I shot him by order. And this one . . . ? Another traitor . . . a double-crossing skunk ! . . . What did he stretch out his hand for ?"

18

ADAM CICHOCKI congratulated himself on his presence of mind. If he hadn't turned his head swiftly, if he hadn't hidden his face with an adroit, quite natural movement, he would have been recognized, denounced on the spot. And he might have been paying a visit to Szucha tomorrow.

" Well, thank goodness he couldn't have recognized me," he thought, resting his head on both hands, as though staring at the coffee on the table in front of him. He did not neglect to watch closely. From behind the fan of his outspread fingers his keen eyes vigilantly noted every movement the dangerous visitor made.

The man looked about the hall, ran his gaze over the baccarat table, took a longer look at the players round the roulette table. He asked the waiter something. Cichocki would have been delighted to know whom he had asked for.

Salinski entered the hall from his office ; his eyes suddenly fell on the new arrival. He twisted, turned round, looked as though he had forgotten something. The visitor had noticed him : he beckoned, went up to him. They greeted each other—but there was something stiff about their greeting. They seemed to be on friendly terms, and yet . . .

“ Ah, so that’s it !” Cichocki thought. “ Interesting ! Very interesting !”

He was not astonished, he simply registered the fact. There are no surprises in such work as his, no feelings, no sympathies. Brain, intelligence . . . faultless calculation. And a firm belief in original sin : “ any and every man may be a swine.”

Cichocki did not finish his coffee. He glanced at his watch. Excellent ! He had an hour yet ; his shift was to begin at nine-thirty.

The two men went out together, probably to Salinski’s office. Cichocki rose and went into the dining-room, and across to the door communicating with the office from that side. He did not switch on the lights. From the next room two voices were carried clearly.

It’s good to be half a member of the household, and not merely a croupier coming to work every day. He knew the arrangement of the entire apartment, all the furniture, every recess. He moved about in the darkness confidently and noiselessly. Now he was standing behind the china cabinet, two paces from the partly open door, but invisible behind the drawn portiere curtain.

“ You’re mistaken, Mr. Zielski ; this time you were not given the exact figure.” Salinski’s voice vibrated like an overtaut string. Cichocki’s trained ear caught that quiver.

“ That may work with others, but not with me !” Cichocki heard the derisive reply. “ Hurry take a look at this !”

A strained, tense silence. Cichocki slipped closer to the door, and very gently drew the portiere curtain aside. The

two men were standing in the middle of the room. Salinski was examining a document. Cichocki was so intent on watching them that he did not hear light footsteps in the dining-room behind him. Someone entered and sat down in the deep easy chair on the farther side of the window, without switching on the light.

"Good, isn't it!" Zielski's voice had a boastful crow. "A copy of the postal schedule. You could have had the other copy if you'd done your job better. It was with the money in the bags. Well, do you like it? A neat piece of work, don't you think?"

Salinski again raised the thin paper with its columns of blue ink entries to the light. He examined the stamps and the signatures.

"Why, have you lost your voice?" the agent continued with a venomous chuckle. "Zielski can manage anything! Zielski can open all the doors. A certain gentleman you know of was good enough to send me a hundred thousand, and I at once set to work to put him right. I don't like round figures, I like payments to be exact. Read that: one million two hundred and fifty-six thousand, seven hundred and eighty marks." He gave out the figures slowly, with pedantic relish.

Salinski handed the paper back and gazed up at the ceiling, wriggling his moustaches. His crafty face revealed no sign of agitation.

"Isn't that enough for you?" Zielski pressed him. "Have I got to tell you the values of the banknotes? Ten per cent. of the figure I've just mentioned amounts to 125,678 marks. Neither more nor less, Mr. Salinski. In other words, I'm due to receive a further . . ."

"Twenty-five thousand," Salinski ended for him. "With a few odd hundreds, of course. I shan't make any bones over those odd marks; I didn't know you were such a pedant. But perhaps it's a family trait. Was your worthy father a chemist?"

" Don't bring my family into it ! And don't try to wriggle out of it. D'you think twenty-five thousand's a trifle ? It may be for you, but not for me. I'm a modest man, I have to work for my living. In any case it's the principle I'm concerned about : money likes correct accounts. It's not the first job I've put in your way . . . "

" And it won't be the last ; I'm sure of that, my dear Henryk." Salinski was now speaking in an obviously conciliatory tone.

The friendly note flowed over Zielski like water over a duck's back. His little eyes had aggressive glints as he said slowly, emphasizing the final phrase :

" I take the view that it wouldn't be wise for you to stop co-operating with me : that day would be fatal for you. But after this business I'm beginning to fear our acquaintance is taking an unhappy course. And I have means of putting an end to it : quiet and painless."

Salinski swallowed the threat easily. He gazed at Zielski coldly, almost arrogantly, and unhurriedly reached for a cigarette from a box on his desk. Only when he had lit one and sent a cloud of smoke upward did he say lightly :

" Oh, I believe you, I believe you. I had lunch with Hahn yesterday, and your name happened to come up. He praised your ability, but emphasized that in his view you're too much all things to all men . . . "

Zielski turned perceptibly pale at the name of the Warsaw Gestapo chief. But he did not retract, as yet. He smiled rather artificially.

" Now that's interesting !" he said with forced assurance. " At supper with General Bor I heard a similar remark made about you."

" A poor joke," Salinski interrupted. " But I'm not joking, my friend. One way or another I was intending to tell you certain details of my conversation with Hahn, yesterday. I can only hope my intervention may have been

of service to you."

Zielski laid his hand on his chair-arm. He put the other hand to his pocket as though intending to bring out his cigarette-case, but changed his mind.

"Mr. Salinski," he said, staring down at the floor. "Surely you realize that I can always find out whether you really do see Hahn?"

"Of course, of course. If Weisendorff feels inclined to tell you."

He went to his desk, seated himself comfortably in his chair, and looked at Zielski as if he were some humble petitioner.

"And if Weisendorff himself happens to know," he added. "I advise you not to treat these matters lightly. There are certain affairs in which—according to Hahn—your participation is entirely superfluous."

"Did he really say that?" Zielski burst out. His other hand gripped the right-hand chair-arm, and he stared gloomily down at the leather seat.

"In those very words, I do assure you. But that's not what I wanted to talk about. Not so long ago I had a word with you about my safe conduct. D'you remember? I emphasized that because of the difficult times I couldn't regard Weisendorff's signature as affording sufficient security for myself and my property. But you made light of my wishes."

"But of course not . . ."

"Let me finish!"

Salinski rose and went across to Zielski. Though he was of insignificant height, as he stood over the seated agent his gaze was impressive. His voice contained a note of irony, which passed into one of triumph:

"Knowing how fully occupied you were with various matters, I decided not to trouble you further. So I took my own steps to secure an adequate document."

He felt in the upper pocket of his jacket, took out a

folded paper and, opening it, thrust it under Zielski's nose. The agent took in its purport with one foxy glance. He whistled with astonishment.

"Well, well . . . Hahn's own signature!" He glanced at the text again. "January 11 . . . but that's today. Dear Mr. Salinski, what did you give in exchange for this?"

The director carefully folded the safe conduct and put it in his note-case. "Rather less than I paid you for a similar document with a less satisfactory signature," he said with emphasis. "Yet sufficient to more than cover those 25,000 marks you're claiming."

"But my dear director, this completely alters the situation. Really, have we got to use such harsh language to one another? I was a little on edge, I admit; I'm sure you can understand that. I'm a modest man, I've got a wife and children. And such a sum . . ."

"All right, let's forget it! Have a drink. Cognac? Whisky? Or would you prefer a Benedictine?"

"Make it a whisky."

Salinski went to his shelves: there was a cheerful clatter, the tinkle of glasses, the hiss of a syphon. The two gentlemen sat down at an occasional table.

"Perfect! Just like pre-war!" the agent praised the whisky.

"Not 'like' at all, my friend. It's the real thing; it's a good fifty years old. I had it from my grandfather's cellar."

"May it give you the gripes, you and your grandfather crossing-sweeper!" thought Zielski.

"And how are our lads?" he asked.

"In fine form; they've got a new boss."

"But what's happened to Antoni? How did you settle with him?"

Salinski leaned forward and demonstratively blew a speck of dust off the table.

"From dust he came, to dust he has returned," he said

sententiously.

"Ha-ha!" The agent laughed curtly. "That's good; that's very good! And the new man?"

"He's dandy! A fine fellow. He himself opened the bags and paid the others their shares; I wasn't so stupid as to expose myself after what happened last time. And will you believe it: he took not one cent for himself!"

"What did you say? I didn't get it."

"I tell you he left himself out."

"Mad?"

"No; just an idealist, a romantic. I've found a peach! He's an officer, he accepts only his service remuneration."

Zielski was completely bewildered, he could not find his voice.

"Mr. Salinski," he said at last. "I won't stand for your sarcasm."

"But I'm not being sarcastic, I assure you. I've really got hold of an extraordinary mug. A real sucker. A young man formerly in the political militant group. He sacredly believes he's collecting money for the High Command. He's burning to get down to work, he probably feels grateful to me for giving him the opportunity to perform heroic exploits. It was he who put paid to Antoni. And on his own initiative: on my word of honour—as a matter of discipline."

"It's fantastic! Ha-ha-ha!"

Zielski laughed on and on, bent double, his hands pressed to his belly.

"Where on earth did you get hold of such a mug?"

"Oh, it's a long story; I'll tell you some other time."

"You're right, it's getting late. Will you be at Weisendorff's on Wednesday?"

"I should be, but . . ."

"I understand: always playing for safety. I shall drive up for you after the curfew. Wait in the gateway at ten prompt."

" Good ! But one for the road before you go. I'll let you out by the backstairs, there's no point in your advertising your visit."

They had reached the door leading to the kitchen when Salinski suddenly stopped.

" Just a second, Mr. Henryk ; turn your back for a moment."

He went to the safe standing in the corner behind the desk. A key clicked in the lock. The agent heard the light rattle of something metallic, then the slam of the heavy door.

" Here, catch !"

Zielski turned swiftly, and neatly caught the article Salinski threw to him. It was a bracelet in the form of a long, coiled serpent. He examined the inscription with a touch of embarrassment.

" What do you expect ?" Salinski said magnanimously. " It's finest gold. And that Hebrew inscription can be removed easily enough. I thought of having it done myself ; I'd intended it as a present for my daughter's birthday."

Cichocki began to draw back, carefully avoiding the faint streak of light coming from the office. As he passed the deep arm-chair by the window he felt that there had been a change of some kind : he caught sight of a black patch against the light upholstery. He went closer, and recognized Krystyna.

" Krystyna," he whispered, " what are you doing here ?"

She did not reply. She was holding her head in her hands.

" Did you hear everything ?" he asked.

He did not see so much as feel her slight nod.

" I must have a talk with you, and today. I shall come to your room when I've finished work. Until then, please don't say a word to anyone. You understand : not to anyone."

He felt for her hand and gave it a strong, brief clasp. " Poor kid !" he was thinking.

Cichocki had had long experience of handling people. When, in the early morning, he went to Krystyna's room, he quickly abandoned the idea of questioning her in detail about her father's activities. One look at her assured him that the accidentally overheard conversation had been a shock to her : perhaps the worst shock in her life. Her eyes testified to that : they were stained with the tears of several hours. She had hastily rouged her lips and powdered her cheeks.

Instead of tormenting her, he began by attempting to justify himself. He explained that he had gone to listen in the dining-room only because the person visiting her father came within the scope of his official instructions.

" I fully realize how you feel," he said later ; " and I appreciate all the delicacy of the situation. I'm convinced that your father's conduct is nothing to do with you." She gave him a grateful look. " I have no intention of questioning you about your father, at least, not now ; though I hardly need tell you that I must take the matter up officially. You must have heard the name of Zielski mentioned : he's a particularly dangerous confidant and agent-provocateur of the Germans. As for Hahn and Weisendorff . . . "

" I know of Weisendorff," she said quietly. " He's the Gestapo officer that dealt with Marek's case . . . "

She stopped short, realizing that Cichocki might not know anything about Korda. A new thought began to flutter in her battered mind ; it took possession of her heart, pierced her breast like a dagger.

" Mr. Adam," she began almost passionately, seizing him by the arm. " I know nothing about my father, or almost nothing. But I've got a feeling that I know who is the new man heading his gang. It could quite easily be Marek Korda."

" Marek Korda ? I rather think I've heard the name."

" He was a squad commander in the Special Action until recently. He had an unpleasant . . . "

" Ah, yes ; I know now."

" He stayed here for a day or two. I'm afraid my father has got hold of him for his own purposes. It must be Marek. Father lied to him, played on his idealism. You heard him say so yourself."

Cichocki thought it wise to cut the awkward conversation short.

" Krystyna," he said very gently, " they say of us M.I. men that we have no human feelings, that we're heartless automata. But it isn't true. You can count on my help and my friendship. But on one condition . . ." he paused. " You must do nothing to hinder me in my attempts to get to the bottom of this affair. You must not talk to your father about it without first consulting me, nor must you let him see that there's any change in your relations with him. Do you promise?"

" Yes, I promise. But what about Marek?"

" We'll see about that later. First we must establish the facts. We shall have further opportunities of talking it all over."

19

THE VILLA MELANIA Eight men are seated round the table, listening to Marek attentively. The Count is not cleaning his nails, 'Tec' fails to give vent to his favourite sententious remarks, for the matter in hand is serious: the disposition of forces in tomorrow's job. Two new men are sitting opposite Marek: the 'Spider' with his foolish countenance, and the intelligent 'Dewy'. Two others taken over from the 'Ape's' disorganized gang are squatting modestly at corners of the table: the gaunt, long-faced 'Fishy', and 'Barrel', a

merry, tubby fellow, the living contradiction of the legend that gangsters are always gloomy. The lamp wick is turned up fully, and the light embraces them all in an incorporeal, intense yellow glow that shows up the plans scattered on the table : hastily drawn sketches, a plan of streets, the façade of a house.

" I repeat . . . " Marek is speaking. " A leather firm evacuated from the Reich. The personnel is Polish, except for the departmental heads. Our job is to carry off chemicals and hides. All the neighbouring houses, in Pius Street, in the Avenues, at the rear, are occupied by Germans: gendarmes and military. Retreat through the park is out of the question. Success depends entirely on your carrying out instructions exactly, down to the last detail. Otherwise . . . Please synchronize your watches. It is now 19 hours 36 minutes. The operation begins at 10.30.

" You will enter the house in twos. The first couple . . . "

" D'you think we'll make it ?" Alek said . . .

The ' Count ' looked negligently at his gold Omega, then at Alek, patronizingly and rather ironically.

" Two expresses," he ordered the barman.

As they emerged from the dive in Krucza Street they almost ran into another couple : ' Tec ' and Vaska. Vaska was in his Wlasow uniform, donned specially for the occasion.

" What the hell are you doing here ?" ' Tec ' hissed furiously, tapping his finger on the glass of his wristwatch. " D'you want to muck up the job ?"

The ' Count ' hastened his steps. Alek, smaller, very energetic, tripped along at his side like a boar cub beside its father.

" Defensive cover : ' Barrel ' with a light automatic."

They turned into Ujazdowska Avenue. Alek took a surreptitious glance back. A patrol of German airmen in steel-grey uniforms was turning out of the Avenue into Pius

Street in the direction of Marszalkowska Street. Fortunately they took the sidewalk on the uneven numbers side: they might not notice Vaska.

"Our luck's in," said the 'Count', as he realized that the airmen were on the opposite side of the street.

A passenger sitting in a broken-down rickshaw saw them coming, took off his cap, and stroked his fair hair with his left hand. Alek took an appreciative glance at the package lying on the floor of the rickshaw; it was a long object, covered with a sack.

"I shall be standing outside the house, on the opposite side of the Avenue. Watch for the sign . . ."

Even in the distance they could pick out Marek's slender figure in a long, dark mackintosh. And the same gesture was repeated: he raised his hat and scratched his head with a calm, commonplace movement of his left hand. Outside the house was a light truck belonging to the leather firm: the 'Count' recognized the inscription on its side.

They turned and entered the house.

"A one-storeyed house, a former small palace, with a grille at the door. Entrance from the front, up five steps; the door is open during office hours. In the hall is a porter, a Pole . . ."

The 'Count's' lean figure was not out of keeping with the place and time.

"What is your business, gentlemen?" the porter asked affably.

"We're from the Telephone Administration. We're testing the apparatus."

The hall door opened with a quiet scrape. Vaska and 'Tec' entered.

"But gentlemen, the tele . . ."

"Out of the way!"

A negligent, yet powerful push; the porter fell back into Vaska's arms.

"Stick 'em up! Don't get windy!"

" Opposite the hall door is the door leading down to the store room. To the right at the back is the door leading to the office. Just inside the door, three paces, is the telephone switch-board."

The girl's face went pale and fixed behind Alek's automatic pistol. Her trembling hand clutched at the earphones over her head.

" Don't interrupt the service . . . take it easy . . . carry on as usual . . . "

The ' Count ' halted in the middle of the large room, by the office desks. The edges of his light autumn raincoat were neatly drawn together. Two pistols at his hips. He said nothing. Four seconds later ' Tec ' entered, his pistols already raised to cover all the room.

" You must excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he said pleasantly, not very loud, as he ran his eyes over the office-workers standing or sitting at the eight tables. " It'll soon be over. Don't move ; keep perfectly calm."

" On the farther side of the main office is the door to the director's office. The director is a German woman."

" Hande hoch !" The ' Count ' had been detailed to deal with this detail. " Bleiben sie sitzen !" he said in a more threatening tone, as one of the two officers in the room started from his chair. The director, a young, but massive specimen of a Nordic blonde, lost all power of movement. The second officer turned very pale, shocked at being taken by surprise at an ordinary commercial conference.

The ' Count ' posted himself professionally, irreproachably at the door, his back against the frame and one wing of the double-doors. On his right he had complete cover of the outer office, on his left, of the small private office.

" The posted couples will move up automatically. I shall enter last. ' Fishy ' with a light automatic will take over from me in the street, as cover."

A buzz on the telephone, strangely loud in the silence. The switchboard girl said uncertainly :

"Frankfurter Ledergesellschaft . . ."

"Take it easy, miss," Marek said. He had just entered the office. "You're in no danger. If anyone is wanted at the telephone, call him as usual. Everything will go on normally."

"Ja, Herr Oberst . . . Augenblick bitte . . ."

"They're asking for Mr. Vogel," she said to Alek, putting her hand over the microphone.

Marek had now taken charge of the operation. "Mr. Vogel!" he called. "Is that you? Come to the telephone and deal with the question swiftly." (The terrified book-keeper had already run to the switchboard.) "The rest of you," Marek's voice sounded polite but firm, "will lie down on the floor." He pointed with one hand. "Here, between these tables." (A scraping of chairs, a faint hum of voices.) "Not that way, sir; face downward, your hands extended beside your body. Straight out! Hurry! Quietly now, quietly! Not so much noise!"

Vogel had swiftly recovered his self-control; he was speaking into the telephone almost normally:

" . . . That goes without saying, Herr Oberst . . . Madam Kunst is not here . . ."

Madame Kunst, the German director, was already lying on the floor, her hands folded across her head. Beside her lay the two officers, disarmed, shaking with fear: the 'Count' had softened them up. Next to them were the junior book-keepers, the departmental heads, the office-girls, fifteen Poles altogether: a formal pattern of human bodies lying perfectly still, readily submissive to superior force.

"Storekeeper!" Korda called. "Bring your keys."

A sturdy figure started up from the floor: a baldheaded man with crimson cheeks. He looked at Marek calmly, without fear or hysteria: he had eaten from many plates in his time. He glanced at Frau Kunst's back view and gave Korda a slight wink. Then:

"I protest!" he said very boldly. "Meine Herren, I cannot . . ."

"Shut up!" Marek cut short the quite well-acted little scene; he pressed his pistol barrel into the man's belly. "Vaska, take him to the stores." He turned back to the man: "And I warn you, no stupid tricks! Quick march!" He pushed him with the barrel.

The storekeeper hurried off under Vaska's escort. The Russian had just brought in the porter to lie down with the others. 'Tec' evened out the row:

"Closer! One next to the other . . . Not on top of that girl!" He jostled a young office-worker with his foot. "This isn't a brothel," he added, scandalized. "It's just another job for Underground Poland!"

Now it was the German's turn; this time the kicks bringing them closer to the mass were genuine. Groans rose from the floor, but they were afraid to cry out. A little tired with his exertions, 'Tec' sat down on a desk. He laid one pistol across his knees, a bottle emerged from his pocket. He took a drink and wiped his lips.

"Did you really have to do all this?" he said reproachfully to the Germans meekly sprawling on the dirty floor. "You've got troubles enough of your own, yet you come and make trouble for others. We're a Catholic people, we didn't do you any harm . . ."

"Our truck will drive up at ten thirty-five."

Marek paced nervously up and down the room. He glanced at his watch: five minutes late already. The telephone buzzed again.

"Herr Oberleutnant Kiebel," the girl called.

The shoulders of the officer on the outside quivered restlessly.

"He's gone," Korda said.

"Tell them he's gone," Alek repeated quietly.

The scrape of the main entrance door being opened and

closed. A civilian hurried into the office, impelled not so much by his own volition as by 'Spider's' pushes. The man staggered to the switchboard, was given a further push by Alek, and stumbled across to a desk, right under 'Tec's' barrel. As he went he took in the situation with a succession of terrified glances; he gasped, beads of sweat emerged on his forehead.

"Here's another for you; he looks like a German!"

The 'Count' accepted the guest, disarmed him and laid him down. A second, a third entered; Poles both of them: frightened, but willing.

Marek went out into the hall: his ear had caught the sound of shots somewhere in a side street close by.

"Our truck will drive up . . ."

'Fishy' crossed the road immediately he heard the first burst from light machine-guns, firing somewhere round a corner. Now they were raking Pius Street, and he slipped behind the wicket-gate of the house. He saw the gang's light truck tear by, firing back furiously; a little behind it were two motor-cycles, than a truck load of gendarmes. 'Fishy' hurried into the hall; Marek listened to his report with knitted brows, a serious look on his face.

"But how about the firm's truck?" he asked.

"It's still standing outside; and all the tyres are sound."

"Good!" Korda went to the stores and shouted: "Load up!" Then he returned to 'Fishy'. "You go back to the street. Test the engine and give a hand with the loading."

The stores was a scene of bustle and hurry. Vaska, 'Spider' and 'Dewy' hurried backward and forward. Mr. Gruszka, the Polish storekeeper, was by no means idle. A ladder was set against shelves; cans, small bedons, priceless chemicals were flung down to be caught by 'Spider', who piled them at the entrance.

"Now those barrels."

Vaska went out with the first barrel balanced on his

shoulder, ' Dewy ' after him.

" The sacks of hides are over in that corner." Gruszka had made his protest, now he was making himself useful.

But in the main office . . .

" *No private articles, no personal property must be touched.*"

" Felus ! Take over guard for a moment."

At the ' Count's ' call, ' Tec ' went to the middle of the main office, where it was easy enough for one man to keep guard over the disarmed and helpless group lying on the floor. The ' Count ' knew what to look for in the director's office : he was discriminating. The safe was a mug's game ; he knew there would be little in it today. But the director's drawer contained money and jewellery, quickly transferred to his raincoat. When that was settled, he turned to the others.

He went back to the main office, one pistol in his pocket, the other held by the barrel. The Germans were lying on the outside of the row : two officers and three prosperous civilians, one from heavy industry, one commercial counsellor, one a lawyer. An expert grip on each body : it's easier to turn over living than dead bodies or sacks of flour. Face upward : " Schweigen !" With his left hand the ' Count ' took out notecases and watches, removed rings, from each in turn. The Poles would have contributed their quota too, if Korda had not been in such a hurry. The ' Count ' heard him coming.

" Pass the staff down to the stores !" he ordered, entering the office.

" Up with you ! But no hysterics ! . . . Not all at once." ' Tec ' drove the flock through the hall and down the stairs. The ' Count ' only supervised the operation, waving his pistol : he had something further in mind.

" *I warn you: the utmost prudence, and calm. Use your arms only in the last resort.*"

As ' Spider ' was loading a sack into the truck his automatic pistol slipped out of his belt and fell to the sidewalk

with a metallic thud. He did not lose his head : with one foot he pushed a sack of hides to cover the pistol. He stared boldly at an approaching German patrol.

The corporal in charge of the squad of Wehrmacht noticed the swastika in the lapel of ' Spider's ' jacket :

" Menschenskind ! Can we help ?"

He bent down ; his gloved hands gripped the sack awkwardly. He struggled to lift it . . .

" Oh, thanks, but it's all right." ' Dewy ' pushed aside the unwanted hands. He seized the bottom of the sack, taking the pistol with it, and hoisted sack and pistol into the truck.

" In loading, speed is essential. The whole job should take not more than twenty minutes. ' Spider ', ' Dewy ', ' Fishy ' and ' Tec ' will go with the truck. The others will leave in ones or twos."

The last can was loaded into the truck, the last customer calling at the office was pushed into the cellar. Vaska rubbed his sweating forehead. A snort from the engine : they had driven off without incident. Marek checked the time : it was already eleven. The job had taken rather longer than he had allowed.

" Off you go, boys !" he turned out ' Tec ' and Alek.

He went to the store-room, opened the door, and went down a couple of steps, so that those inside could hear him better :

" Listen, all of you ! Repeat this to the Germans. I'm going to lock you in. You must not raise the alarm for another five minutes. I warn you : we may come back !"

A moment or two later a young man in a dark, almost military raincoat mingled with the stream of pedestrians in the Avenue, the heart of the German district, protected by patrols, posted guards and barbed wire.

Vaska was highly astonished when he saw that while

Marek was speaking to the prisoners downstairs the 'Count' stuck his head out of the doorway on the left-hand side of the hall. According to their information and instructions the office on that side was empty.

"Come here!" the 'Count' called in a loud whisper.

The Muscovite followed him in. He looked about him, though not very quick in the uptake, he knew a good job when he saw it. On the floor, face upward, was a man, gagged and bound, in a Tyrolean jacket. He was staring up stupidly at a lighted lamp above him: the room was shuttered against the daylight. In one corner, behind a desk, was a safe: opened, and cleaned out. The 'Count' had a pistol in his left hand; with his right he was taking packets of banknotes from the desk and stowing them in his pockets. When he had finished he took out his cigarette-case.

"Has everybody gone, Vaska?"

"Yes; Mr. Marek is just off."

The 'Count' lit his cigarette with his lighter. He looked at the German:

"Put him out!"

The Russian asked no questions. He sat down astraddle across the German's chest, his knees pressed on the man's outstretched arms. Evidently he noticed the look in the man's eyes, the face distorted with fear:

"Keine Angst—no pain!"

His great paws seized the man's head by the grizzled temples. A powerful clutch, a straining of muscles, a spiral movement as though he were unwinding a nut. The spinal column cracked: there was no groan, no pain, no death agony. Only the blood still lived: it streamed from the facial openings.

"Here, catch!" A packet of banknotes flew through the air, to fall at Vaska's feet as he rose from his knees.

The 'Count' walked calmly out of the building. He did not hurry, he puffed at his cigarette. He had the air of an industrialist coming away from the office after successful

negotiations.

Vaska did not catch up to him until he had reached the first corner : the Russian had had to stay behind to wipe his hands.

“ And now,” he said, “ we’ll go together.”

The ‘ Count ’ turned on him angrily :

“ Beat it, you Russian swine !”

20

SOME SPOTS are sacred with bloodshed : such are castles, or cities steeped in history. Others are idyllic, pleasant, always overflowing with goodness. And there are cities, districts, alleys which have always attracted money. In such spots you can buy everything ; every article has its price, every man is a trader, a banker, a middle-man ; every one’s thoughts turn on profits or losses. When this sort of thing has gone on for years, for centuries, you can never sweep away the golden dust which has settled on the offices and warehouses of that spot, you will never eradicate the smell of trade that clings to its walls. The human beings change ; the fumes of money remain for ever, persisting in every brick.

Warsaw, too, had such everlasting trading centres. The Jews had been deported and murdered. The ghetto had fallen amid the smoke of its heroic agony. But the *genius loci* had remained, saved from the pogrom of the streets. The owners of the dark, awkwardly arranged shops had changed, the warehouses and store-rooms had gone from above ground to crawl under the earth, through a maze of cellars they extended beneath the ruins of the houses. False fascia-boards protected them against the German occupant. The spirit of gain had

revived, or more correctly, it had never died in the spot where Bank Square, Grzybowski Square and Panska Street come together.

Barrows, carts, platform trucks, lorries, rattled over the stone setts. To this spot all kinds of commodities found their way : sugar, vodka, cigarettes, flour, hides, textiles, arms, boots, chemicals ; here everything found swift, discreet disposal. All the loot of the city - gangsters was sent to this district, to be stocked in the wholesale stores of a few magnates, the dictators of the black market. And from this spot urgently needed goods flowed out into the city, into the countryside ; in this spot prices were fixed, and profits at the rate of a hundred, a thousand per cent were garnered. This confluence of streets and squares was the centre, the exchange, the secret goods warehouse of the illicit city.

Since taking over command of Salinski's gang Marek had visited the district frequently. He had a regular customer there.

' Franciszek Malinski : Coal and Wood ', said the small fascia-board above the entrance to an office in the heart of a dirty courtyard. In the office Korda was counting notes. On the other side of the desk was the owner of the firm, an energetic, middle-aged man, with a keen-looking face. Before the war he had been a tax-collector , now he was a milliardaire, a financial potentate.

The March wind did not find its way into that recess of the courtyard, did not bluster against the dirty window panes. The only sounds were the rustle of dollar bills, the very loud tick of a clock. The two principals were silent : there are no unnecessary conversations in big business transactions. Marek finished counting, but did not tie up the packet. He looked at the merchant interrogatively :

" Mr. Malinski, haven't you made a mistake ? I make this lot 7,600 dollars."

" That's right. That's what I made it."

"What, are you giving us a higher price for the cloth supplied yesterday?"

"No. Six thousand is for the material, as agreed; the rest is for the sugar."

"What sugar?"

"The sugar your men brought along yesterday, forty sacks of it, on a platform truck."

"Ah yes, of course . . ." Marek began. He was about to say that he hadn't sent any sugar, but he stopped himself.

"Yes, of course, I'd forgotten. 'Tec' was to bring it."

"'Tec' and the new man, the tall fellow with a long face."

"'Fishy'."

"I don't remember, he's only been here twice. I told them to come for the money today, but as you arrived first I can pay it all to you." He smiled affably. "I don't like to leave a bill unpaid a minute longer than necessary, and I like to treat good suppliers like you properly. Ready cash, swift turnover—they're my principles."

"What time did you tell them to call?" Marek asked.

"At eleven. They should be here any moment."

"Good! I'll wait for them."

"In that case, d'you mind if I go? I can fit in a little business visit in town. You can give the porter the key."

'Fishy' and 'Tec' were not greatly taken aback when they found Marek waiting for them in place of Malinski.

"Oh, so you're here, Mr. Marek," 'Tec' said. "Where's the old man?"

"Unfortunately he couldn't wait to see you. But he gave me the money for the sugar. Work on the side, eh?"

'Fishy' looked at 'Tec' as though entrusting him with the defence of their joint interests.

"Well, what of it? Is it forbidden?" 'Tec' answered with a question.

"In my squad it's forbidden," Marek said sharply. "I shall keep the money and pay it over where it belongs."

"But may I ask why?" 'Tec' sat down at the desk, in Malinski's chair, and gazed at Korda boldly, not in the least abashed. 'Fishy', who had been rather disconcerted, plucked up courage.

"Why?" Marek reflected on his answer, lighting a cigarette in order to gain time. Only a month, two months, before, he would not have hesitated for a moment, he would not have tried to pick his words. But today? Today he was more mature, richer in experience—if experience was the term for his present festering existence, for the sensations and reactions accumulated in a swamp.

"For the simple reason," he said at last, "that we're working as a single, compact group, for a common, general cause. You know very well that the money we get goes for military purposes."

"Ha-ha-ha!" 'Tec' laughed outright. "That's a good joke!"

'Fishy' did not have sufficient pluck to join in the laughter, but he smiled, looking at Marek as if he were an ignorant greenhorn who provided older hands with a little fun.

"I don't see any reason for laughter," Marek snapped, keeping rein on his anger. "Surely the director has told you what happens to the money we take from the Germans?"

'Tec' stopped laughing; he stared at Marek fixedly, and even with the personal curiosity one feels for strange, incomprehensible phenomena.

"No offence, Mr. Marek," he said seriously, with a hint of respect in his tone. "I wasn't laughing at you, only at what you said. In the old days things were different in regard to the stuff we took from the Germans. And before you joined us we didn't keep to the Germans either; we sometimes dealt with Polish black exchange men, or whatever came our way, whatever Mr. Zielski passed on to us."

“ Who ? ”

“ Mr. Zielski. Do you know him ? He’s in the Cripo. I worked with him even in pre-war days, but on a different line.”

Marek managed to conceal his amazement ; he did not reveal that he had known the name of Zielski for a long time, and always in the worst possible connection.

“ And as for these ‘ payments to the military ’,” ‘ Tec ’ went on, “ Salinski’s pulling the wool over your eyes. He’s never told us who he pays it to or what it’s for, but we know all the same what he does with the money. Earlier on he was buying property ; but when the Soviets began to advance he sold it all, and it was difficult to find out what he was doing with the proceeds. Antoni thought he was putting it into foreign currencies, gold and sparklers. Now we know . . . ”

He felt for his note-case and took out a letter with a Swiss postage stamp on the envelope.

“ Here, read this ! It’s from the ‘ Count ’. I told you he’d gone off to Switzerland after that job in the Leather Firm. He says something about our director, but not on your lines.”

Marek slowly read the ‘ Count’s ’ clear, correct writing (he had always boasted of his secondary education) :

“ Don’t be surprised if our old man quits your end and turns up here. He’s sure to come to Geneva if he gets into a tight corner. And he’s got something to come to, I can tell you ! Here in Geneva he’s got four houses ; and an official of my bank, the Libisch I’ve told you about already, says he’s one of their most important clients. He’s got money in Madrid and Lisbon as well, and on the other side of the pond . . . ”

Korda folded the letter and passed it back across the desk to ‘ Tec ’. His face was drawn, almost old-looking. His faded eyes were gazing into a void, into a dark, soundless emptiness. His one desire now was to be alone, to withdraw into himself, to get a better understanding of what had happened, to make some decision. Without a word he took

out a packet of notes, counted 1,600 dollars, and handed them to 'Tec'.

"You see," 'Fishy' spoke up rather diffidently, but with conviction, "that dough was honestly come by. We made it on the side, but you'd given us a week's leave. We've done no one any harm, and we don't make any bones about our work with you . . ."

"Okay, okay!" said Marek. You can go."

He walked slowly along the street. Depressed, his head on his chest. So he'd been made a fool of again. First his love had been mocked at, had been torn out of his heart—the love he had bought with the blood of his comrades, his friends, who continually visited him when he slept in the lonely room at Milanowa, where the ancient pines rustled as they peered in at the window. And now he had been taken in by the hope of a helpful and friendly hand, of a come-back, of redeeming himself. Nothing but bloody double-crossing and trickery all the time!

"If he could only be sure!" Yet perhaps he had only himself to blame for being such a simple sucker. What else was to be expected of such a creature as Salinski, a suspect despised by all? Where were his eyes, where was his common-sense? How could he have failed to see that he was being laughed at, his idealism was only being exploited?

"Perhaps the truth is that I wanted to be taken in!" he could not resist the beastly thought.

He crossed Grzybowski Square, making his way between the crowds of carts, his boots deep in the mud and mire of March. He turned towards the centre of Warsaw. As he went his eyes happened to light on a street name-plate. He read the name of the well-known street: 'Marsh Road'.

"Don't go into a bog, not even to pick flowers. A bog always sucks you down, mud will always stick to your boots." His memory recalled the moralizing remark; the speaker's

face, his father's face, rose before him. He pulled a sneering smile at that face with its grizzled pointed beard, at the canting remark about the bog, one of the innumerable moral lessons his father had given him every day, to his boredom and despair.

"And now I've gone into the bog," he thought with perverse satisfaction. "And despite all your proverbs, your sermonizing, your moralizing. And now you can rejoice: you often used to say I'd 'stumble and have a bad tumble'."

Marek had never liked his father, he could not stand his exalted preaching, his boring talk, the way he tortured his wife, his children, all his family with fine phrases, with prudent advice; the way he dragged them off to lectures, to educational performances, to second-rate plays of uplift, to terrible official and unofficial public meetings. 'A sanctimonious old bore' was how he always thought of him. And now the image of his father, always neat and sobersided, acted on him like a spur, as provocation. He resolved on the one thing that would have most shocked his teetotal parent: he would go on the binge.

But not at the 'Campfire'—anywhere but there. He turned into the first bar he came to. A few moments later he was sitting over a Vienna Schnitzel and drinking vodka neat. The bar was deserted and quiet, and he could sit and think undisturbed.

It was his father who had first made a fool of him, not Salinski, nor Krynska. What was left of all that highminded philosophizing of his? Where were the righteous men he had always ranted about? Where were the decent women? Twisters, cheats, light of loves, wantons, flirts and strumpets. A sucking bog dragging you down. All the world was a bog, a quaking morass. And there was nothing that could be done about it, nothing whatever. Better to look the truth in the face than go on believing in beautiful flowers, in noble intentions, exalted deeds and schemes.

After his fifth vodka he thought he had found the thread of truth leading through the tangled skein of his complicated moral problems. Fatalism ! It just had to be. He was fated to be a sucker, taken in by his father, by Maria, and now by Salinski. He was fated to become a gangster, despite himself ; he was fated to live in a land of dreams, amid illusory fictions. But now no more of that ! Time he put an end to all that. As there was no turning back, he must at least learn how to walk through the morass of life, must learn to survive, to get whatever he could out of it for himself, and to hell with the others.

The German authorities' Polish paper, the ' Warsaw Courier ', happened to be lying on his table, and his eyes mechanically read the headlines. Cautious, evasive. But beneath them the unequivocal content : Russian advances ; the continual withdrawal, or rather flight, of the Nazi divisions.

So the war was coming to its end ! Bringing liberation ? He had long since become disillusioned on that score. It was a second occupation that was advancing on Warsaw with all the invincibility of fate. The deduction ? Every man for himself. No one could escape his own destiny, but at least it was worth trying to avoid that great, historic destiny.

His thoughts turned to the ' Count '. He hadn't been a sucker, he hadn't been twisted, by himself or by others ; he hadn't taken in anyone, he had never tried to pull the wool over his comrades' eyes with high-flown talk. In a sense he had even done some service in his own way : a large amount of German money had passed through his hands. He had expropriated and impoverished the enemy, looting them of their loot.

The vodka in the bottle diminished rapidly. His mind recovered its equanimity. He was almost reconciled to reality. Salinski ? The bastard had tricked him filthily. But he would pay for it, he hadn't been dealing with a child.

It is a peculiar fact that fatalism does not provoke a

mechanical reaction, does not deprive a man of initiative, sapping his energy, nor does it paralyze the will. Marek, though now a fatalist (newly converted) made several decisions, and established his future relations with people and with time. But one person would not fit into his new categories : his mother.

He had never found her boring. At one time she had been the most important being in his life, and she had always remained quietly but persistently in his thoughts ; perhaps not so much in his thoughts, nor in his filial behaviour, but secreted in the deepest recess of his heart. He had not seen her for many months, though she lived in Warsaw. Now her picture came back to him by force of contrast, perhaps as a reaction from his father. He rather felt that she would not approve of all he had decided on as he sat over the vodka.

He was lost in thought. He stared into space, past the grey and unfamiliar faces in this strange dive, surveying his past deeds, his past days and months. Now the bar was crowded and noisy ; but he was once more alone, a solitude in the midst of life.

He paid his bill and went out.

Some time later he stood outside the gate of a well-known house in the Mokotow district. The porter recognized him. " Why, it's Mr. Marek ! Your mother will be pleased." " I can't go up to see her, I'm in too much of a hurry. But give her this packet from me, will you ? Do it at once, it's to help her : five hundred dollars. And this . . . for yourself."

After which, when Salinski answered the telephone he heard Marek's voice :

" I've got some money for you and your collaborator . . . Yes, for Mr Zielski . . . Oh, Warsaw's a terribly small place, really . . . We won't talk about that now. I'll send it along by Alek, tomorrow. But I'll take a thousand dollars for myself . . . No, not for expenses, just as my share . . . Oh,

certainly, with great pleasure ; only not at your place, you must come out to me. I'll give you a very warm welcome . . . No, nothing particularly. I've got a message for you : greetings from Libisch . . . you know . . . the gentleman in Geneva."

21

CICHOCKI turned the key in the lock, then hung his dark-coloured silk handkerchief over it, to stop the lamplight shining through the keyhole. He treated the door leading out to the kitchen similarly, then set to work with professional skill.

He was in no hurry : he had two hours ; Salinski had just telephoned to say he would not be home until five in the morning. First the desk, lit up by the powerful bulb of the adjustable lamp. He was glad to have that kind of lamp to work with, it would facilitate his activities marvellously. A curt, swift glance : nothing of interest on the well-dusted, green baize of the desk. In the middle were writing accessories, a photograph of Krystyna, and next to it that of a young boy (" must be her brother, he's very like her "), letters, accounts, and business notes held by a brass clip. He looked through them rapidly, and laid aside an envelope with a Swiss stamp.

Now the drawers began to bear testimony to the owner of the desk. Six of them opened easily, to reveal contents of no interest to M.I. : account books, documents, and old letters ; pairs of stockings , lady's underwear from a famous Parisian firm. But the two drawers at the bottom of the left-hand pedestal were locked, so they must be examined more closely.

He set the lamp on the floor, directed its reflector on to

the centre of operations. The locks were not difficult : the first was fitted by one of Cichocki's own keys, the second turned after several attempts with a skeleton key.

The upper drawer was a disappointment : the casino accounts, which he knew well enough already ; I.O.U.'s, a case full of bills of exchange, a few shares. In a separate file, proofs of the owner's super-patriotism : the valueless amaranth of a National Loan certificate, a certificate issued by the National Defence Fund, the membership cards of ultra-loyal societies, diplomas covering a couple of decorations (a commemoration medal, a cross for services rendered, and the like), also receipts for contributions to the League for Polish Defence, the Polish Red and White Crosses, a whole file of receipts for smaller and larger sums paid to other bodies : the praiseworthy book-keeping of a faithful and joyous supporter. Cichocki turned it all over with distaste : he was well acquainted with the dustbin of musty, frequently fictitious services. He was looking for something else. Perhaps it was in the last drawer ?

He pulled it half out. Damn it, nothing here either ! From the bottom of the drawer a dozen nudes of men and women, in various lascivious poses, stared at him : pornography in all its varieties, hues and aspects : Viennese, French, Italian. Pompeian frescoes ; exquisite private presses, unashamedly illustrated by the artists ; old rococo vellums ; miniatures and cartoons. All on the one theme ; stimulating, perhaps, when seen in isolation, but boring, dull, in such wholesale quantities.

He was about to push the drawer back when, groping among the erotic slough, his hand came upon something hard. He took out a Mauser of the smallest calibre, loaded, and in good order. He rummaged still deeper. His astonished fingers rested on the bottom of the drawer ; it was quite shallow—surely too shallow.

" Ah, now we have it !" the suspicion took form in his

mind. With a ruler from the desk he measured the depth of the drawer, then the depth of one of its side-walls. A considerable difference : some two inches.

He took out the drawer completely and put it on the floor, its back to the light. " How would I fix it ? " he thought as he examined the boards. " There must be some kind of catch." There was ; in fact it was quite obvious, for it had been handled frequently by slightly moist, greasy fingers. A strong, even pull, and the false bottom came away without resistance , the valuable contents rested on the carpet.

A stout exercise-book had a familiar name written on the cardboard cover : ' Melania '. Inside were dates, columns of figures ; 12.5.42, Cocoa, 2,300,000 ; H.Z. 1,250 (2.6.42) W.G. 1,300 dollars . . . Then more Cocoa, Minsk ; Cocoa, Rawa ; and so on in regular columns, until at last at the very end : 7.2.44, Frankfurt Leather, 3,750,000 zlotys, and two further notes.

" Beautiful work !" thought Cichocki, not without a touch of admiration. He had already learnt quite a lot, but now he had got figures, dates, and very transparent abbreviations, such as ' Cocoa ' instead of Communal Savings Bank. The others could be deciphered easily enough when necessary. He laid the exercise book aside and picked up the remaining documents.

There were only one or two of them, but they were all very interesting. A passport of the Republic of Honduras, with Salinski's photograph, but made out to the name of De Salle, and stamped with a Swiss visa issued a month previously ; a permit to carry arms, issued by the Warschau Kriminalpolizei ; a safe-conduct issued a year before, signed by Weisendorff.

Now Cichocki speeded up operations. A micro-film camera can be worked with one hand, after some practice, of course. His left hand laid the documents smoothly on the baize of the desk, beneath the powerful light of the desk-

lamp. He set one eye to the squared view-finder ; a flick of a finger ; a whirr from the film-roller, and that shot was ready. Now for the next. He worked with speed and precision.

Ten minutes before five it was all finished. As he emerged from the office, in the dark dining-room Cichocki ran into a familiar outline. Salinski had returned earlier than expected.

Switching on the chandelier in his office, Salinski stood for a moment motionless, overcome by the irrational feeling of danger. His nerves were conscious of someone's presence, though at first glance the room looked perfectly normal.

He walked swiftly to his desk. everything in order, no trace of an alien, uninvited hand. He switched on the desk-lamp : it was in its usual place, as he had left it. The photographs, the clip, the writing accessories, even the newspaper laid down on the left-hand side—every detail seemed to contradict his fears, to prove them imaginary. And yet . . .

On the green baize, within the circle of light from the lamp, he noticed an ordinary match with a small brown head. A cold shiver—the chill of death—passed down his back. In a panic he snatched out his bunch of keys, with trembling hand he opened the bottom left-hand drawer.

In a moment the 'Melania' exercise book was in his hands ; but the little brown match-head did not drop from between the pages, though he had certainly left it there after the last entry : he had the habit of using matches to mark pages in books and rough-books. In vain he shook the pages, holding its back by two fingers, in vain he turned over the pages systematically, curbing his impatience : the small piece of wood could not turn up in such a search, for it had been lying a good half-hour on the desk, under the lamp.

He sat in his chair. He snatched up the match, broke it

into little pieces, then split them down, tore them with his nails into splinters, into fibres. He worked passionately, with incomprehensible persistence, as though the fate of the world depended on this act of destruction. At the same time his mind was working feverishly : his thoughts, his imagination, withdrew in leaps, flew back into the past, scenting out evidence. Immediately round the first corner—in the dining-room—he recalled Cichocki. Beyond that—who knows ? That other thing too might have some connection—that strange telephone call from Marek . . .

Cichocki—who was this fellow Cichocki, really ? A pleasant sort of chap, well bred, affable, a perfect worker : punctual, very tactful. A real aristocrat, no doubt about that ; but what else, what beneath it all ? He had brought no testimonials, had had no patrons . . . ah, but he had : he had been recommended by Krystyna.

He recalled the talk with his daughter, and the rather sudden engagement of the new croupier. He had been grateful to Krystyna then, she had saved him a lot of bother after old Majewski's abrupt departure. But later ? The man performed his functions in an exemplary fashion, truly. And he never complained, never asked questions, never drew anyone's attention to himself. He remained in the casino like a piece of furniture, necessary, but almost unseen, noticed only when it is shifted out of place. A shadow, air . . .

" Yes, but air penetrates everywhere," Salinski continued the metaphor. " I must question Krystyna." He had no doubt that she must know a great deal about her protégé ; she had frequent conversations with him, inviting him to supper and treating him as a friend. Only now did the director realize that Cichocki had been rather more than an ordinary croupier in his casino.

He could not sit still. His own chair burned him, he was continually conscious of the strange intruder in his room. He was afraid of things unknown, incomprehensible. Even

the modern pictures on the walls repelled him, filled him with loathing, almost with terror.

He put away the fatal exercise book and went into the casino, to collect his thoughts by mingling with people, in the gambling atmosphere which he always dominated, which brought him profit.

Gaming was finished at the roulette. Fantulis and one of his girls were still sitting at the baccarat table, together with lanky Van Loos, Cwierski, and one or two others. He did not find Krystyna at the buffet. Nor was Cichocki in the hall. He ran an absent gaze over his guests. He hardly responded to Knapp's bow ; the head croupier was finishing his coffee, as though about to leave. Salinski was on the point of returning to his office when a sudden idea flashed through his mind. He went up to Knapp's table.

" Well, how have things gone tonight ?" he asked, sitting down beside him.

" Not too bad, sir. Golocka has lost again, von Wiesen too ; he played to set numbers. His new lady insisted on it."

" But were you on the second shift ? I thought Cichocki was taking it."

" No, he finished at twelve."

" Ah, yes . . . But where's my daughter ?"

" She went to her room a few minutes ago."

Knapp said good night, and left. Salinski called for coffee. He sipped the drink slowly, his thoughts worked very swiftly. Cichocki and Krystyna formed the two poles of the axis of energetic conjectures presented by his terrified mind. The two poles of the axis were seen only vaguely, engulfed in thick darkness.

He knew very little about Cichocki ; of recent days he had had only rare contact with his daughter. Though as correct in her behaviour as always, he saw now that she had seemed to be avoiding him ; she did not wait for him when he was late for meals, she did not talk about her affairs and everyday

worries. The smile had vanished from her tense, strangely serious face. Absorbed in his own sphere of interests, Salinski had not reflected on these changes, he had simply ascribed them to over-tiredness, and war conditions. Now that she had become the key to the deciphering of Cichocki he reproached himself for taking so little interest in her of recent months. He decided that the inevitable conversation with her must be carried on all the more cautiously. "But how to begin it?" he pondered.

The thicket thinned out at last. Once more she caught her foot in a root, one last branch barred her path, one or two twigs slipped and lashed her in the face. Now the way was clear: an open glade, with green, succulent grass. Flowers, birds, gorgeously coloured berries. A clear stream invited her to bathe.

It wasn't an ordinary rabbit: Krystyna knew that. She wouldn't hurt the handsome, fluffy little animal. She would stroke the white fur, she would nestle it against her, would kiss it, they would play on that green carpet. She stretched out her hand, she could almost touch it; but the rabbit fled away in little leaps. Now the glade began to shake, to slope up, to bend: Krystyna was above, on the crest of the hill, the rabbit was below, in the depths.

The melody of an old song came like a zephyr of wind, yearning, mournful, lonely. The swallow-like, quivering words undulated over the glade, the green hue died away, peace returned: unknowing, waiting. The white rabbit returned too, and seated itself on her knees. Now she had it in the grip of her thighs, in the folds of her summer dress. How warm, how good, this enchanted moment!

Some animal—a cat, a gorilla?—leaped suddenly down from a tree, seized the rabbit, first with hungry eyes, then with an enormous paw loaded with heavy rings. It grumbled, snorted, puffed. She could not catch the words, but she

knew them : " We're leaving early this morning ; I've come to a business arrangement with him." A shadow lay over her : how stifling the air here : how helpless she was ! The coarse form dispersed slowly, turned its head once or twice, wriggled its moustaches, spitefully, ironically.

Cichocki gave her his hand, they jumped across ditches filled with mud. Now mountains—they were going up a path along the edge of a precipice ; it was fearful to look over. Faster, faster ! We must save him, get him out. They hurried painfully up the slope, slid down the cliff ; in one spot flying sand, elsewhere shingle, sharp stones, rocks. " Marek ! Marek !" A white pullover emerged in front of her. " He's a very decent youngster."

They made their way down a precipitous gully. A strange, half-ruined house, a narrow entrance, a corridor. Somewhere in the distance a lamp gleamed—perhaps that was the way out, the way to air and help. A spot of blood. " Marek ! Marek !" " Cichocki !" Nothing ; only a hollow echo, no answer. Darkness, no one. The door was strong, and bolted ; iron bars laced the windows.

She wanted to flee, she knew *they* would be arriving any moment. Kostek had been caught, he couldn't hold out, the Germans would be driving up soon. Hostile footsteps upstairs, someone knocking on the door : " Porter !" Panting, convulsive breath, her heart in her mouth. The drums drum violently, light flashes in her eyes. " My God, My God ! It's father, in Gestapo uniform . . . "

She woke up with a scream. She rubbed her eyes ; the hanging lamp dazzled her made it difficult for her to return to the everyday world. Only her father's voice, warm, very anxious, wrested her from her tormenting nightmare.

" Put out the centre-light, it hurts my eyes." She drew her head away from her father's care.

She got up quickly and lit the bedside lamp ; it was veiled with a silk shade. Salinski went to the door and

switched off the centre-light, then returned to her.

Krystyna was sitting in the corner, her legs tucked under her, locked in herself. She gazed at her father with dilated, still terrified eyes. Beside the last vestiges of her terror there was something else in that mature gaze; it is not a very long road from love to hate or loathing, much shorter than fathers, confident wives, self-assured mistresses are in the habit of thinking.

"I'm very sorry I frightened you," he began. "Knapp told me you'd only just left the hall. I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm very tired; can't it be tomorrow?"

"I'm leaving early. I won't keep you long."

"Well, I'm listening."

He took her by the hand; her small palm was lost in his large paw which glittered with the gold and gems of rings.

"I'm worried about your health. Don't interrupt, my dear," he forestalled her impatient gesture. "I've been thinking about it for a long time. You look very queer, you're suffering with your nerves . . ."

"There's nothing the matter with me, I'm quite all right."

"Quite all right, quite all right! Always the same song. But you can't throw dust in my eyes: a father's heart is more reliable than any thermometer. Either you're not well or you've got something on your mind."

"Who hasn't, these days? You're moody and pre-occupied, yourself."

"That's different, my child. You've not got any business anxieties."

"Oh no, you're right! At any rate, not your sort!"

The ironic tone was not lost on him. He looked at his daughter reproachfully.

"I don't know what you're getting at."

She did not reply. She stared into space, seeking a way out—for Marek, for herself, even for her father. She hesitated. Can one influence people simply with passivity, with a dull

silence, or direct events into another channel thus? She had waited long enough, she had achieved nothing. On the contrary: Cichocki, too, had grown taciturn, had cut himself off from her. He did not seek her advice, did not keep her informed of the steps he was taking.

Possibly her long silence discountenanced Salinski even more than her irony. But he did not give up: he tried another tack.

"I tell you frankly my luck's completely out," he began, half to himself, not looking at her. "Things haven't gone well between me and Cichocki, either."

He stopped and took out his cigarette-case, glancing at his daughter surreptitiously; a hint of interest flickered over her face.

"I'd got an excellent post all arranged for Mr. Adam. I wanted to have a talk with him; I might have taken him with me to Cracow tomorrow. But as he's gone out . . ."

Krystyna remained obstinately silent, though her eyes were eloquent with a sharp, angry stare.

"But perhaps it's just as well," he went on. "After all, I hardly know him; who can say whether he could hold down the job? What does he really know?"

He broke off again and looked about the room. "Haven't you an ash-tray in here?" he asked. "Ah, I see it! All right."

"But what do you think?" he said in a different tone as though reaching out to another compartment of his memory. "After all, you know Cichocki well, he's your protégé."

Krystyna started up from the bed. Pale of face, her lips compressed, she confronted her father. Before she said a word their eyes met and were locked in a desperate embrace, the first hold in the struggle that had begun.

"Yes, I know Mr. Adam very well," she began in an unnaturally quiet tone, deliberately speaking slowly in order to control her anger. "I know him well enough to warn you not to try anything on him; it won't work so easily with him as it

did with Marek."

She stopped, exerting all her will to prevent an outburst, seeking the right words, an effective means of reaching her father's heart, or at least his mind. Dozens of thoughts and arguments rushed chaotically through her seething brain. Her eyes went dark.

"But Krystyna, my dear, I don't know what you're getting at," Salinski said in the most natural of tones. "Haven't I taken an interest in Marek? I've given him a good position . . ."

"Position! You've turned him into a bandit. D'you want to make use of Cichocki, too, for your schemes? I tell you that won't come off!"

"Girl, what are you talking about?" He got up from the bed. His stupefaction was excellently feigned, or maybe he was genuinely taken aback by what he had just heard. He stretched out his hand as though to stroke her head.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, starting back violently. "Don't you see that I can't even look at you? Leave me alone! Leave Marek alone! Don't try anything on Cichocki. I wish I could forge that you're my father."

The cork bottling up her frenzy flew out. The long suppressed indignation spurted in a flood of words, gestures, hateful looks. Salinski took advantage of her incoherence. He seated her on the bed almost by force, then, not saying a word, stood over her for a moment in a concerned and fatherly attitude. He did not put too long a strain on the tense silence, but began to talk in a tone of resolute yet kindly reproach.

"I have no intention of rebuking you, child. But I'd like to forget this conversation as quickly as possible. I realize that you've gone to pieces; in pre-war days a girl of your age wouldn't have known anything of what you've had to put up with, you and your friends. But believe me: this time you've gone beyond even present-day standards. I didn't expect my daughter to take filthy gossip seriously."

Krystyna started up, clutching at the head of the bed. Her face flamed.

"It isn't gossip! I heard it with my own ears. Pity Mr. Adam didn't make a record of your talk with that creature that visited you in January—that worm Zielski! Isn't that sufficient for you? Do you still deny it? You talked about Hahn, about Marek, about money, all sorts of filthy, horrible things."

She might have gone still further, but for the silence into which her words were falling. Salinski did not deny it, did not defend himself, did not interrupt. But there was a change in the look of his brown eyes; something in his face quivered, lit up and died down again. Krystyna was the first to lower her gaze. She fell back against the head of the bed, clutched her head between her hands. She was empty, sucked dry. Even tears, the last refuge, did not come.

Her father now knew all he wished to, and more: he knew a little part of the future.

She had no strength left to protest when his hand rested on her hair. She may not even have heard his words:

"You're justified to some extent, Krystyna. Zielski is a foul creature. But don't condemn your father. Life is difficult. You're not experienced in business, you don't know how you have to fight in order to avoid sinking to the bottom. Later, when you understand better, we'll talk about a number of things."

She did not feel the kiss on her forehead, a caress of evil, of corruption; and yet, after all, perhaps of love too.

The greyness of the day, peering dimly through the chinks in the curtains, did not open her eyes. Only the slam of the car door, the sound of an engine starting up—sounds familiar to her—rose from the sunlit courtyard to impress themselves on her. They brought her to her feet, drove her to the window. Her father's car appeared through the archway of the main gate.

She realized at once. "My God! What have I done?"

NOW EVENTS hurried swiftly on one another's heels, gathering, pressing one on another, as if fate, playing with human beings, or planning the bloody fable of life, insisted on cramming a multitude of facts into a few, a very few hours.

The clock of the General Post Office said seven-twenty when Krystyna crossed the Napoleon Square on which it stands. She was on her way to Cichocki. She fully realized that revealing so much to her father had been an act of disloyalty, which she must atone for at once by warning Adam of the new situation that had arisen. Anxiety—uncertain and vague, but no weaker for that—drove her from her home into the chill of the April morning, into the city streets filled with pedestrians hurrying to work.

At first she walked quickly. But a young man, in build rather reminding her of Marek, gave her a fleeting, half derisive glance that expressed the joking question: "Where are you in such a hurry to, sister?" She slowed her steps.

Gradually she grew less agitated. There was no reason to fear immediate danger: her father had gone off to Cracow; there could be no change in the situation for the time being. The breath of the familiar streets—everyday, but unusual, for the air was fresh and springlike—soothed her nerves, put her in a more optimistic mood.

Cichocki's apartment was not far away, in a turning running parallel with Jerozolimska Avenue, up to Marszałkowska Street. "No. 21 Widok Street," she repeated to herself. She reached the corner, saw the number of the first gateway—twenty-three—on the opposite side, and stepped into the road. At the sound of a hoot from a car turning round the corner into Widok Street she drew back at once.

She looked again to her left, but another was following close behind the first. Suddenly . . . for one moment she stood petrified, then she turned and ran back round the corner. Glancing over her shoulder, between the two cars she saw a well-known figure : her father had just come out of the gate of No. 21. He turned to the right, in her direction.

Lurking in a gateway, she counted the seconds. If he did not pass her almost at once it would mean that at the corner he had turned right again, in the other direction. No : here he came. Through the small window of the wooden gate she saw his stout figure in the well-known, light raincoat. He went on towards the centre of the city, walking with a firm, resolute step.

She hurried back to Widok Street almost at a run. A chill in her heart. Panting, she flew up the stairs two at a time.

The fourth floor : a long, dark corridor—bachelor rooms. " Just like in my dream yesterday," she thought chaotically. On the left, far down the corridor, a low-watt lamp. A series of identical doors : where was it ? Forty ? Forty-two ? At last she caught sight of a visiting card pinned to the door, she could just read it in the dim light. ' Adam Cichocki '. She knocked. No answer. She tried the handle ; the door opened at once.

A large room, bright, tidy : it seemed almost normal. Adam, in a blue dressing-gown, was seated quietly at a table. " He's fallen asleep, surely ?" she thought, snatching at the picture of repose and reassurance : the arms, motionless, crossed on the table ; the white hands, with fingers folded ; the strong line of the shoulders and head in the crook of the right arm ; the wavy fair outline of hair ; he was still, but alive, evidently intently watching a dream.

But he was not asleep : he was just awakening from life. He was dying consciously, calmly, without regret and without pretensions on the world. She realized that, as she went closer and saw the blood flecked with white foam seeping

through the slightly parted lips, then the gentle movement of the head and an effort to speak.

"Mr. Adam . . . Mr. Adam . . . What's happened ? . . . It's me . . . It's me . . . Krystyna. Do you know me ?"

He did not reply. Long seconds passed. They continued thus, with their heads close together : he quiet, she almost helpless, overwhelmed, incapable of action. Dark spots swooped over her, crushed her, whirled before her eyes : black snow, a flight of crows.

She pulled herself together at last. She tried to raise him, to take him to his bed. With a gesture he stayed her good intentions. "Don't bother, don't bother !" the hand said before the lips could speak.

"It's not worth it, Krystyna," he began, raising his head with great difficulty, with even greater effort forcing the words, the intelligible phrases to come from his lips. She bent over him, catching the words with unexpectedly clear, ardent discrimination.

"It's not worth it," he repeated. "I'm mortally wounded . . . I'll be done in a moment . . . I have . . . always . . . been ready."

He choked. The blood poured from his nose, his mouth. She snatched up a towel hanging by the wash basin, put it to his face, and soaked up the crimson flood.

After a moment he was able to go on : the flow stopped when, with her help, he rested his head high against the back of the chair. Her small, not very confident hands supported him there.

"There's nothing compromising in here," he whispered, gazing into her eyes with a conscious, wise look. "All I know my . . . superiors . . . know too . . . Only you must notify them . . . Beyzym . . ."

"How about your people ?" she asked.

"Don't trouble, that's not important. I've a commission for you."

Exhausted, he broke off. He closed his eyes. Her heart was constricted with a grievous, painful spasm. The walls, the furniture seemed to be falling on her, caught up by a black, whirling vortex. She pulled herself together.

"Go at once to Milanowa . . ." he began more quietly, still perfectly calm. "Villa 'Melania' . . . Not far from the highroad, on the left, the southern side . . . Marek . . . Korda . . ."

Her hands felt the weight of his head more heavily. She bent over him, her ear almost touching his lips. She caught the last words:

"Go . . . what's happened to me may . . ."

Zielski was decidedly astonished.

"What's all this, Mr. Salinski? You drag me out of bed almost at dawn, simply to tell me that we've got to renounce our hope of millions? But it's a gold mine . . . especially for you. So far as I'm concerned . . ."

Salinski impatiently knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"Can't you see what's happening? The Soviets will get here, that's quite clear. Did you think this dangerous game could go on for ever? Others have turned it in long ago: you know that even better than I do. Some are in Switzerland, others are trying for governmental posts--it's every man for himself."

Zielski gazed up at the ceiling in concentrated thought. His shifty eyes were fixed on one spot for a long time.

"Good, good!" he said at last. "But what's all the hurry for? What are you so worked up about? You're not yourself today."

Salinski gave him an unfriendly look; he did not like revealing too many cards at once.

"Then listen!" he said reluctantly. "I'm under observation!"

The agent laughed; he was not at all impressed.

"What did you say? Under observation? Whose, if I may ask?"

"There's nothing to laugh at," Salinski snapped. "You can be sure I'm not referring to the Germans. The Polish M.I. Have I said enough?"

Zielski at once turned serious.

"Are you sure? You're not imagining it, are you?"

"Unfortunately I have proofs. They sent someone to my place. He's smelt out everything, he overheard our talk in January. Last night he searched through my desk."

Zielski went rigid in his chair, and listened closely.

"Well, and what next?" he asked, when Salinski grimly added details of further revelations.

"I've disposed of that gentleman," the director said. "But the position remains serious."

He raised his left hand and ticked off his further arguments on his fingers:

"First: I don't know how much he's been able to pass on to his superiors; he's had plenty of time since January. Second: Korda—that's the one who took over from Antoni—is beginning to give trouble. A day or two ago he rang me up and gave me a very fishy message. He doesn't want to come into Warsaw, he himself fixed the quotas for the share-out after the last job, he's resorting to threats. Third: the 'Count' is already in Switzerland; I don't know what he's up to, what contacts he's making . . ."

"That's enough," said Zielski.

He sat thinking for some time, running his fingers through his thinning hair.

"It can be done," he said at last.

"Only it must be done quickly, my dear Henryk."

"Don't be alarmed. I've got a swift and sure means."

BEYOND the Central Railway Station the train gathered speed and passed into a monotonous rhythm, beaten out regularly by the wheels: from rail to rail, rail to rail. The mood induced by the journey took possession of Krystyna: space was swallowed up in time, time was mingled with space.

She closed her eyes, to separate, to isolate, to draw into herself; to clutch at her thoughts, entangled yet scattered, beating against the compartment windows, washed away by the rain driving against the panes. A vain, useless labour. Truly the chaos of her mind and heart were forgotten as she dropped into brief dozes born of her weariness, but they brought no rest, not even relaxation. A different chaos arose: of words, of voices, of names, tugging, insistent, rushing along the rails of rhythm. from rail to rail . . . rail to rail.

Snatches of the conversations going on around her were transformed into serious and personal remarks: into the voices of Marek, Beyzym, Gabriel, her father. Cichocki, though dead . . . through her fault . . . also spoke clearly and urgently, more strongly than he had in his room: "go at once . . . go at once . . . What has happened to me may . . . happen to him," she finished the sentence.

Again and again she opened her eyes, fought her way out of the enchanted ring of her thoughts. But they began again immediately; now it was Gabriel speaking: "Good! Go at once." Then her father: "Life is difficult . . . to avoid sinking to the bottom . . . avoid . . . to the bottom."

The rhythm began to slow down. The train stopped at the first station. She looked about her: grey, weary faces. A smuggler or two, vigilant though talkative; two young people with document cases, returning from some office.

Opposite her a woman quite young, about thirty. She had the face of an intellectual, hard, with an expressive profile, carried a shabby raincoat, and had a kerchief over her head. "She's no peasant!" Krystyna's conspiratorial training enabled her to decide that, and to draw the conclusion: "A liaison officer! But how she's got herself up!"

That short journey to Milanowa through the light of the April afternoon would remain with Krystyna, in her system, like a blood clot wandering through her veins, invisible, apparently forgotten, yet always present, threatening disaster. It could not be said that that hour or so was a time of decision, of dramatic solutions in her youthful life. The truth is never so simple as that. We often take steps that are important, pregnant with consequences, almost as if we were in a haze, even though they may be sudden acts, out of the blue, ostensibly dictated by the course of external events. That they have come to maturity somewhere in our own hidden depths, that they have grown out of us ourselves, out of our own yearning and desire—this we do not know as a rule, to this we are blind.

So with Krystyna. She had long since made her decisions, had passed sentence, though she did not know it: harsh on her father, mild on Marek's case, for the decision was dictated by her heart. In her talks with Beyzym and Gabriel, and during that train journey, she had no doubt that she was doing the right thing, the necessary thing. Preoccupied with action, she had had no opportunity to reflect on the significance of events or of her own part in them, a part she had seized rather than had thrust upon her. Only the journey, the necessity to sit still in the compartment left her free to think. For the first, and perhaps the last time in her life she had some realization of the essence of drama. The intolerable agony of existence, the pathos of being, overcame her, disarmed her, penetrated into all her sensibilities, her conscience. It was a different, much older Krystyna that got out of the train at

Milanowa : a woman much poorer by many illusions, much richer in knowledge of herself, of life, and of humanity.

As the train slowed down to enter the station she managed to get control of her nerves. She felt the gaze of the woman opposite resting on her. She answered with a quick, friendly glance : her intuitive perceptions were blunted, and she had no reason to feel any presentiment.

Both the women got out. It was 3.10 p.m. Krystyna made straight for Villa 'Melania' ; she had known the way ever since childhood, for at one time the house had belonged to her mother. Later Salinski had let it, but during the war he had recovered possession. He had not said anything about it to his daughter, for fear of betraying the purpose to which he was putting it.

The other woman turned northward, in the opposite direction. She at once stepped out briskly ; her leg-boots twinkled over the pot-holed road, she sprang lightly over the puddles. The rain had stopped, the wind had taken over ; before long it would dispel the clouds, and the night would be clear and moonlit.

The two women reached their destinations at about the same time, Krystyna being a shade earlier.

The wicket gate at 'Melania' was fastened from inside, but not locked, only held with a wooden hasp. She put her hand through a chink in the palings and pulled back the hasp. A moment or two later she knocked at the front door ; she did not know that it had been barred up for many long months.

Alek came round from the kitchen. He knew the 'young lady' by sight, for of recent weeks Marek had been using him to take various messages to Salinski. He bowed politely and looked at the girl with obvious pleasure, but with a hint of embarrassment.

"Is Mr. Marek in?" she asked.

"I'll go and see. Will you wait in the garden? I'm not allowed to let anyone in without express permission. I'm

very sorry, but that's the lieutenant's order."

Marek was greatly astonished at the unexpected visitor. He hurriedly put his room in 'order', throwing under the bed crumpled linen, bottles, cigarette ends, and quite a collection of articles, some of them valuable, which were scattered about on chairs and the floor with obvious contempt for tidiness and system. Alek readily helped him; with a few sweeps of a broom he pushed part of the stuff behind a cupboard, then went to ask the visitor to come in.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The guard's voice brought the woman in the kerchief to a stop a few paces from the gateway to the farm. She looked about her keenly, but could not see anyone: all the surroundings seemed dead, asleep, or deserted. Only when the challenge was repeated did she realize that the guard was posted in the farm attic: the barrel of a light machine-gun peered out of the small window.

"I've come to see the farmer," she called up. "Mr. Kurpiel."

"Wait there; he'll come out to you."

Kurpiel, a still young peasant, intelligent-looking, and dressed in good town clothes, greeted the woman as an old acquaintance.

"Ah, it's citizeness Roza! Please come in."

"Where's the lieutenant? I've got a very urgent message for him."

"He's asleep with the boys; they only got back early this morning."

"I must see him at once."

"What's happened?" Marek asked, when Krystyna, rosy with the nip of the spring air, and obviously excited, entered his room. He looked at her inquisitively: he hadn't seen her for some months. "I certainly wasn't expecting you to turn up here. Mr. Salinski . . ."

"I've not come from my father," she interrupted.

He was struck by her passionate tone of protest, the angry, even hateful gleam in her eyes.

"I've got nothing to do with him or his affairs. I'm concerned with you, Marek. You're in danger."

He looked her up and down with an amused, derisive expression on his face.

"You don't say! You must be kidding! In such a secure profession, and in this quiet, peaceful little hole . . ."

Her eyes lost their gleam; his sneer touched her to the quick, it did not fit in with the fiction of her girlish imaginings. On his handsome face, in his eyes, in the lines around his mouth she thought she discerned something alien, some new expression, of cynicism or depravity.

"Mr. Marek," she began again, trying to suppress the fervour in her voice; "I've come from Cichocki; and I've seen Gabriel . . . Do listen, it's an urgent and very important matter."

"Let's sit down," he said seriously; the name of his former superior officer stung him, made him feel inclined to listen. "Well, now tell us what it's all about?"

She began to stammer out her story, incoherently.

Tugged by the feet, Lieutenant Jontek cursed long and monotonously before at last he emerged from the barn bay. Sleepy, with straw in his hair, he blinked in the sunlight that poured through the door as he went to greet Roza. He was wearing long leg-boots and a windjacket. The cut of his trousers, which were badly worn but made of excellent whipcord, and even more his bearing and the touch of hauteur in his young, impudent face, betrayed the officer, a professional from a good regiment.

Roza was sitting on the threshing floor among the bodies of his tired and snoring men, enveloped in the stink of a squad too weary to wash or clean up. He recognised her, but indulged in a prolonged yawn, betraying no enthusiasm whatever.

"I've never known orders to reach me at a suitable time," he

said sarcastically. "Either at night, or when we're resting, immediately after a march or an operation. I told Kurpiel I wasn't to be disturbed until the evening. Couldn't you wait, comrade?"

"Citizen Jontek, it's half past four," Roza said in an official tone. "Comrade Kurpiel told me of your order, but the matter is urgent. The High Command demands immediate action, the good of the cause requires it. In the struggle for liberation there is no time to take breath."

Jontek eyed the liaison woman as if she were a volume of verse, as boring and bathetic as any modern poet. (To tell the truth, he had never read any modern poet, but he felt contempt for them on principle.)

"Good, good!" he barked. "Where are the orders?"

"Good, good!" Marek said, when Krystyna told of Cichocki's death and his last words, urging her to make this journey. "Very fine, but how does this Cichocki . . . I may have known him, I believe there was an M.I. man of that name . . . how could he know of any threats, or designs against my detachment?"

"I can't explain that," Krystyna admitted, "though I can guess where he got the news from . . ."

"But perhaps you didn't get it right? I know how dying men behave, I've seen them often enough. Usually they babble away incoherently, or else so indistinctly that it's impossible to understand what they're driving at."

"I'm sure I'm not mistaken. He spoke quietly, but very distinctly, and he mentioned your name."

"That's queer, I admit," Korda lapsed into thought.

"But after all," he went on after a long pause, "what can they do to me? D'you think it would be so easy for them to liquidate our detachment? Easier said than done! We've got machine-guns, automatics, and plenty of ammunition. I can't see how anyone could do anything."

Lieutenant Jontek took the paper Roza had withdrawn from her bootleg. When he went closer to the barn door and threw a short leather jacket round his shoulders the sunlight picked out a red, but very dirty armlet on his left sleeve. Across it ran two rows of black lettering: PEOPLE'S GUARD.

He unfolded the letter and read half aloud, straddling his legs firmly and authoritatively:

"Disarm and collect the materials of a small group of Radical National bandits, working to the detriment of the Polish people. At Milanowa, Villa 'Melania'. The situation of the villa is as below."

He stopped and studied the sketch-map drawn in pencil, and furnished with arrows and a caption

"Well, well!" he said with all the interest of a weary fisherman who after long waiting has seen the float bob slightly on the surface of the river. "Well, well! heavy machine-guns, light machine-guns, automatics, grenades: quite a little arsenal!"

"Comrades!" he went on to read the routine formal conclusion in a louder tone. (Several of his men had woken up, two or three heads were poked out of a bay, a couple of partisans slipped off the hay to the ground.) "Citizens! Avenge the heroic death of the workers and peasants, the partisans murdered at Borow by the National Democratic Bandits. Signed: Juliusz."

"Mr. Marek, Mr. Marek," Krystyna said, with an impulsive, girlish movement seizing him by the hand. "Don't take it lightly. I'm sure Cichocki didn't say what he did without good reason. He always weighed his remarks, he never talked irresponsibly." She gazed at Marek imploringly, timidly, as though asking a favour. "The best of all would be for you to get away from here and throw it all up."

Korda looked at her, and smiled sadly. He drew his hand away, rose to his feet, and began to walk to and fro, concentrated, with knitted brows.

"Get away? Throw it all up?" he said with a sneer.

She had never known him use such a tone before, but now it returned again and again to his voice, like a deliberately adopted mask, a curb on his deeper feelings and thoughts.

"Get away? Oh no, Miss Krystyna. I see you don't know me. Here I am and here I remain. With my men, with my bandits, if you like to use that term."

"But Mr. Marek, I don't think badly of you at all; I know you were drawn into . . ."

"Drawn into it or not, it doesn't matter now. I don't want to talk about your father and his methods. I'm a bandit, and today that's as good a profession as any other. For me it's the only one possible, and I even find it rather interesting."

"And it's more remunerative than any other," he added with a touch of sadism, gazing down at her with an unpleasant smile.

She raised her hands to her face. He realized that he had gone too far. He added as he stood over her :

"But thank you all the same for your good will and your warning. Whoever turns up here will get a warm reception." He went to the door, and called :

"Alek !"

"Jozek !" Lieutenant Jontek called up to the hayloft. "Throw down my map-case."

He took out his map of the district, spread it open in the sunlight and studied it for some time, paying no attention to the waiting Roza.

"A wonderful order !" he said at last, beating the map against his left hand. "In fact it's just the very thing: those blighters' weapons would come in very handy. Only . . ." he paused and stared at Roza with a touch of professional superiority, "only . . . it's impossible of execution . . . today at any rate."

"I don't understand. You must be joking, comrade."

She took the order from him and thrust it out, pointing with

her other hand to the last sentence. "Have you read it right through, citizen?" she asked sharply. "It says here quite plainly: 'To be executed at once. April 5, 13.30 hours'."

He snatched the paper from her and put it in his pocket. "I can read Polish just as well as you," he said, curbing his anger. "Well then?"

"I repeat: it is impossible of execution today."

He opened the map and explained patiently:

"I say nothing of the fact that I was caught in a trap around Sochaczew for three nights, and the squad has got to be rested. I ask you simply to look. (He pointed to the map.) This is where we are now, the village of Chrzanow. To 'Melania' the way we would have to take—we can't go straight there—is five miles. We've got to cross the railway here; that has to be done after dark, of course, to avoid the German guards. I need one hour, or two, or even three, for the task of liquidating the band. And then we shall have to fall back as far as Mariansky forest: a mere fleabite, only twenty-five miles."

He put the map down and looked at her with genuine amusement.

"And now, my dear comrade, will you please explain how all this is to be done in one night. And all without any reconnaissance, operating with a squad that's beaten to the world."

"The order must be executed," she said resolutely. "Juliusz foresaw your objections and warned me that you've got to put every ounce into it. You must take the risk. The world situation, and especially the situation on the Eastern front . . ."

She opened out into a long lecture: no longer poetry, but rather a juicy extract from a current pamphlet, a classic example of 'agitprop'. Jontek turned his back on her, listening with one ear only, but thinking hard, seeking for a solution.

"Vaska, call Alek! Where the hell's he got to?"

"Everybody in?" Korda asked when Alek ran into the room.

" Yes."

" Good ! Get them all in here ; I'm ordering an alert. Until nightfall, the Bren upstairs is to be manned continually : Vaska will take the first turn of duty. No one is to leave the house. Check up on the truck. Hand out grenades. Ammo is to be at hand."

" Oh yes," he added, looking at Krystyna. " And get something to eat for this young lady. Then she'll have to be driven to the station."

" I've no intention of going," Krystyna started up. " I'm staying with you."

" Okay ! We'll talk about that later."

" Have you finished, citizeness ?" Jontek thrust the sudden question between two sentences of an exalted speech about the Red Army and the solidarity of the proletariat.

She was silent, but only for a moment. She opened her mouth to go on, but he stopped her with an impatient wave of the hand.

" There's only one way," he said. " I'll try throwing the detachment across the line in daylight. Then we could begin operations at dusk. That's the one chance."

Without waiting for her comment he turned on his heels and shouted into the barn :

" Up you get ! We begin to move off in half an hour."

24

LIEUTENANT JONTEK swallowed his last piece of bread, drank the milk, and, putting the mug down, reached for his nap. But he did not unfold it for some time. His gaze wandered absently round the peasant farmyard, as though the noise of

thirty mouths gulping down Kurpiel's potatoes and milk and the bread and lard from their knapsacks distracted him.

"Attention, boys!" he said at last, returning to the barn, where the partisans were sitting in little groups round their dishes of food. "Do any of you know this district well?"

Several voices called: "I do!"

"Three will be enough. You, Klimek, and you, Jozek, and you, Guniek. Come here. Sit down. The rest get on with your grub. We'll be on the move in a moment or two now."

When he had obtained the information he required as to the terrain of the operation, he called his detachment together and explained their immediate task. He was listened to attentively, in silence, without enthusiasm. An air of weariness hung constantly around these men, who were continually being transferred from spot to spot, from district to district, sometimes obtaining small successes, but more often having to disengage hurriedly from superior enemy forces. Marches, forced marches, through forests, along side-roads and over pathless wastes: such was all their life. The partisans' chief weapons were their legs.

"Leave your rifles behind," Jontek ordered. "They'll go by cart. We shall cross to the other side of the railway at once. At Milanowa the first group will take cover in the hollow behind the town slaughter house: assembly at seven at the latest, that is, in two hours. The second and third group will assemble at the same hour in the garden by the pond on the western outskirts of the town. You will leave in twos or threes at the most. Klimek, Jozek and Guniek will act as guides to the three groups, and will indicate where you should cross the railway. Anyone who knows the district will help in guiding the others. Walek will remain here and supervise the order of your departure."

"Very good, sir!"

"Walek, when the last man has gone you'll report to me; we shall leave together."

The men began to set off in twos or threes, in a fairly orderly, steady movement, controlled by Walek's curt orders :

" Wojtek and Antos, with Guniek."

The first three went out into the yard, passed through the gateway, and turned left. They had all the appearance of ordinary peasants, in very muddy boots. Youthful faces with no furrows or traces of any past, moulded into one general expression as the result of their communal forest life.

" Isidor, your two now."

" Franek and Staszek," Walek indicated the next couple. " But leave that military cap behind."

The Polish field service cap with its white eagle was left on the threshing floor, with the arms and ammunition. The rifles, chiefly of Polish pattern, were clean, though most of the slings were of rope, only one or two being of leather. A few bayonets, a German helmet or two, home-made canvas bags for slinging over the shoulder. Haversacks and blankets were piled separately. Two cases of ammunition were standing in a bay of the barn. On top of them Jozek carefully put the detachment's one light machine-gun, very clean, and well looked after, blinking in the sunlight through the apertures of its cooling jacket.

" Mr. Kurpiel," the gunner said to the peasant, who had just entered. " Wrap it in a blanket, will you ? And don't pack it at the bottom !"

Half an hour later Kurpiel's farmyard was almost deserted. Only Jontek and Walek, the peasant himself, and two men armed with pistols—the escort for the equipment—were left. They packed the rifles, ammunition, and machine-gun on to a cart and covered them over with straw.

The two wings of the forest detachment drew closer around the villa ' Melania '. The right-hand, larger, force, consisted of twenty-five men in two groups, working along two roads. The left-hand force took a much quicker route across fields,

past scattered villas, between ancient pines, past the town slaughter-house to a small hollow curtained by dwarf pines and junipers.

The detachment commander was still at Chrzanow ; he was questioning the farmer concerning the distribution of the German forces in Milanowa and the district.

" Things are pretty bad !" Kurpiel began, scratching his nape. " I drive my own girls out into the forest at night, and even in the daytime they often have to rush into the undergrowth."

" Of course, of course ! I'd noticed you'd got an empty house. I suppose you drove them out today too because you were afraid of the Germans ?" he winked. " My men aren't Germans or bandits."

" No offence, lieutenant, but I like to be sure. One of my girls is nigh on sixteen, the other's younger, but big for her age. The Germans take off anyone they can get hold of now, for work and not for work, as the people say. God knows what they do with the girls."

" Enough of your daughters. Tell us about the Germans." He unfolded his map. " Can you show us where they're stationed ?"

" Of course ! In the 1920 war I was a corporal."

Kurpiel's thick finger wandered uncertainly over the map, seeking out the German quarters. The lieutenant helped him :

" Here's the station : d'you see that oblong ?"

" Well, it's just the other side of the station."

" Perhaps it's here, in these buildings ?"

" No, that's not it ; it's somewhere around here . . ."

Giving up all hope of getting further information, the officer folded his map. He had had experience of peasants before.

" All right, that'll do. I shall have to see. And what about the town gendarmerie ?"

" They rode off to Grodzisk early this morning ; but I

can't say when they'll be back."

"D'you know which is Villa 'Melania'?"

"Of course! It's the other side of the Royal Road. When you come out of Station Street you go straight ahead, and it's the second turn on the left. The villa's the last one, quite separate, standing among trees."

Jontek got up from the table.

"We'll go and have a look at it, Walek. And you, citizen," he turned back to the peasant, "set out with the equipment well before dusk. Go to the hollow first, and then up to the pond."

Vaska would not have paid any attention to the two strangers wandering about outside the villa if he hadn't noticed Jontek's boots. Vaska had particular respect for Polish footwear, especially since Marek's arrival. Nowadays he always estimated the importance of any pair of legs and the person they supported by the cut of the boots, the uppers, soles and heels.

So when, as he sat watching from the first-floor window, under the trees he noticed a pair of officer's boots, muddy but obviously of very good quality, he thought it advisable to see what they were up to. The two boots were standing below him, planted wide apart, in an unquestionably military pose, with the toes facing the house. Before they shifted to make room for another pair—peasant's boots, and not so interesting—Vaska prudently drew his head back behind the window curtain. He watched the visitors very vigilantly. Now they were coming nearer; they turned left. In a moment they would be outside the villa gate.

Vaska went to the side window, from which he had a view of the road over a shyly budding ash tree. He was right: that younger man was an officer. He ran down-stairs and knocked at Marek's door.

"What d'you want?" an angry voice barked.

Vaska pushed the door open uncertainly, knowing that Mr. Marek had a rather unusual sort of guest. At the window was the slender figure of a young girl with her back to the room. Though rather slow in the uptake, Vaska felt an atmosphere of tension in the room. Marek, his face concentrated, turned on him as if the Russian were a mastiff fawning on his bad-tempered master.

"Now what's the matter? What are you bothering us for?"

"There are two men . . . in the woods . . . good boots one of them's got," the Muscovite began to stammer.

"Now, talk sense! What is it, and where?"

Krystyna turned and listened closely to Vaska's incomprehensible story of officer's boots, told in his own mixture of Polish and Russian.

"Don't try to make a fool of me. Clear out!" Korda cut the story short. But as Vaska closed the door in a hurry Marek flung it open violently and called after him:

"Tell Alek. Let him find out what they are."

Alek rushed to the front of the villa, but found no one. The two pairs of boots had already turned into the highroad and were out of sight.

After studying the position of 'Melania' villa, lieutenant Jontek and Walek returned to the Royal Road. The officer walked along in silence, while his 'adjutant' was far from thinking of military exploits. He leered at the women in the street; at the corner of Station Street his eyes, grown unaccustomed to towns during many weeks of forest life, were attracted by the window of the first shop they came to. He stood staring with open mouth; and he might have remained there as a living monument to the lust of the eye, if the stern voice of duty had not spoken behind him:

"Walek, what are gaping at? Haven't you ever seen a town before?"

The youngster took one more glance along the seductive street, at the cinema, or a wineshop ; then he turned abruptly and followed the lieutenant, staring moodily at his feet.

Jontek crossed the high road and looked about him circumspectly. About a hundred yards from the Station Street corner he halted on a plank bridge thrown across an irrigation ditch. In the field beyond were a couple of heaps of gravel : an ideal site for a fire-point. He turned back to the town.

" Listen, Walek !" he began. " Jozek will take up his position here with the machine-gun and three men from the second group. They'll cover us against any German attack from Station Street and Grodzisk. Now we'll choose a spot for you."

" Very good, sir," Walek said peevishly.

Jontek hastened his steps, striding past Station Street towards the slaughter-house.

" This'll do !" he said, at a spot where thick bushes of juniper lined the highroad, forming an excellent screen at a very convenient point dominating both the main roads. Behind them were the pines of Milanowa woods , on the right stretched ploughed fields, to the left the buildings of the slaughter-house were visible.

The lieutenant turned into the bushes. They sat down on the sandy soil.

" Your men," he said to Walek, " will assemble on the dunes beyond the slaughter-house. At dusk you will bring them this way to invest the villa from the north."

" Very good, sir! But there's an hour and half yet to sunset."

" Don't be funny ! In a bloody hurry to get back to the town, aren't you ? Listen to what I'm saying , you'll get me mixed up."

He snapped off a twig of juniper and used it to draw on the sand.

"Now get this fixed : the first group will act as cover. You'll post four of your men here. Each of them with six grenades. You will take your other six men and approach 'Melania' in open order from the highroad. To here, d'you see ? Then lie quiet, wait for the signal. Jozek will be posted at the bridge, and I with the rest of the detachment will invest the villa from the south, the west, and the east. Get that ? On both flanks you'll have contact with half an assault squad."

He erased the drawing with his foot.

"After the operation all men will withdraw westward, beyond the pond. We'll assemble there for the further retirement."

"Very good, sir ! But now ?" He looked at his officer for the first time with a peculiar, eager interest.

Jontek glanced at his watch and scrambled to his feet.

"Well, there is just time. We'll go and have one."

25

MAREK went to the window. He looked absently at the shadows of the pines, avidly interlacing, staining the carpeting of brown needles ; at the slender, shooting trunks, the tufts of grass, the bushes, the paths edged with faint, very young green. He passed an unseeing gaze over the golden patches that capriciously marked the bark of the trees, the steaming ground, the low roof of the woodshed, the palisade.

All these things were in his field of vision, but his mental eyes were turned on something else, were seeking a different reality, trying to comprehend and order it with his troubled mind. He was feeling pretty sick.

Krystyna's sudden arrival and her vague yet fervent warnings had affected him strangely. Not with fear, nor with the threat of danger. He was prepared for anything from Salinski, he had even been expecting a crisis to develop in his relations with the director, though not that it would take a violent form. Even now he did not treat the warnings of some dying M.I. man at all seriously. Like all soldiers in the combatant forces, he could not stand the M.I. men ; on principle he did not trust their out-of-the-ordinary methods of obtaining information.

Nor was he bothered at all by Cichocki's death. " He got what was coming to him," he thought of the murdered man with no regret or sympathy. " He fell foul of the old man, and so he got it in the neck." He regarded Salinski's deed as a manly, perfectly understandable act : it fitted into his own general principles, it did not diverge from the general line pursued by Marek's former exemplars, Gabriel and others.

His mind was worrying at something else ; his queer mood, his disturbed equanimity, were due to a very different event. Always quick at jumping to conclusions, on that March day when he had learnt of Salinski's double-dealing he had come to a new, ordered view of the world. He had recognized the law of the jungle as his law, had adopted it and acted on it, as the result of his own experiences. At first the truth had been bitter, yet vital ; but then he had openly welcomed it, as a pungent but stimulating drug.

He had lost all his confidence in people, all his sympathy and respect for human beings, regarding such feelings as the last vestiges of a former sentimental age. He no longer trusted anyone, expected no assistance, still less devotion, from anyone, beyond what could be commanded by superior force or passion.

But now this girl . . .

What the hell had she turned up for with her gossip-mongering ? He had asked her that question straight out

when she insisted on remaining. Her only answer had been to veil her eyes with their lids, to droop her head girlishly.

He had given orders for a bed to be made up for her in the room where her father had occasionally spent the night. He had persuaded her to go and rest. And now his mind returned to that former question. It seemed a trifling matter that she should have come, yet it challenged all his ideas persistently. Her conduct did not fit in with his scheme of things, which he had adopted as a whole with all the enthusiasm of a new convert.

"Nobility of character? Disinterestedness? Bosh! It might be yet another trick?"

He reviewed the course of her extraordinary conversation; her ardent anxiety for him, her passionate entreaties that he should get away, her allusion to 'making good'. ("Look at her, like a bloody saint, a lily on a dung-heap!") And that peculiar, direct tone of hers, that seemed to come from her very depths. No, that couldn't have been put on.

So what?

He gazed out at the forest. The last rays of the sun were caressing the crowns of the pines. He opened the window. A branch of lilac, swollen with juice, spurting with buds, peered into the room, swept over his face. It brought back memories of another garden, other lilac, and other caresses: green eyes, smiles, the crunch of gravel, swift footsteps . . .

He started back. He cursed aloud. Now he had his conclusion formulated: "She's got .. crush on me! That's why she came!"

He closed the window violently. The lilac had no chance to escape; it was caught between the window and the frame, and a broken twig dropped into the room: a green offering of spring.

"It's as clear as daylight!" he thought. "She thought it all up in order to have some excuse for running after me."

His self-confidence returned, brought back on the wings of

his imagination. Now he had achieved a new synthesis, close to the truth this time, but, even so, flattering and false.

Krystyna awoke suddenly and sat up in bed, tense, ready to jump out at once.

Darkness had fallen, but there was nothing to indicate any danger. When she strained her ears, through the thin door she caught the sound of a tune being whistled somewhere quite close. Someone slammed a door downstairs ; someone laughed, a chesty laugh. Then she heard the distant tinkle of glass and metal, an echo of the communal supper.

She struck a match and looked at her watch : only five past nine ! She put the flame to the candle. She must wash and undress properly ; she had been sleeping in her clothes, with a blanket thrown over her.

She slipped her feet to the floor, drowsily feeling for her boots. In the neighbouring room the whistling died away , but the voices below went on murmuring monotonously, drowned occasionally by the sputter of her candle. She put on her boots and went to the window. When she opened it wide a stillness blended with light, the resinous scent of the pines, and the smell of the quickened earth ; burst into the room. The keen breath of spring flowed over her face along the streaks of moonlight that slanted down from the secretive sky through a sieve of clouds and branches. She gave herself over to the caresses of the united elements, listening to the murmurous silence, gazing at the play of silvery lights and shadows.

The vibrating call of a nightjar sounded not far away—far-carrying, shrill. Then silence again ; but now, fearful, with a piercing shiver.

“ Did you hear that ? ” ‘ Spider ’ asked.

The large piece of pork cutlet transfixed on his fork remained suspended in mid-air, above the lips parted in avid

expectation. 'Fishy' and 'Dewy' put their forks down. 'Tec' stopped sawing with his knife, but only for a moment.

"Did you hear that?"

Marek pushed away the plate Alek had put before him. They both listened tensely.

"Open the window. But don't lift the black-out."

The rusty fastening grated; a pause; then the nightjar called again: a gloomy note, violating the silence with its piercing whistle.

"That time it came from the highroad direction," Alek said. "But it's close, not more than fifty yards away."

Korda went to the window; he reached it in time to hear a third call. It came from the west, not far away, somewhere behind the garage.

"Partisans!" he thought. "Well, it's their look-out! We've got to defend ourselves."

He went across to his bedside table; the pistol lock sprang back metallically, the first cartridge slipped into position, his finger released the safety catch.

Vaska was in the garage, servicing the Bren gun. Fully occupied with his food, he did not catch the note of the nightjars. Fragments of the broken window fell right into his plate, bringing him to his feet. He blew out the paraffin lamp, raised the Bren, aimed at the square of the window, now showing bright in the dark wall. Two heads were outlined in it as if on a silver screen.

In Krystyna's ears the jangle of broken glass fused with a burst of muffled shots. A moment of silence, then the Bren opened up again: now clearly, and much longer, with the resonance of forest echoes.

She put out the candle and ran on to the landing. Down below, in the light of the kitchen lamp hanging on the wall, she

saw Marek. He was standing at the door opening into the hall, with a pistol in his hand : an energetic, concentrated, foreshortened figure. She heard his order :

“ ‘ Tec ’ ! ” Upstairs to the Bren ! ‘ Spider ’, you take the young lady’s room.”

A further burst from the garage drowned his next words.

“ ‘ Dewy ’ ! ” She heard him again. “ You take over the Bergman.”

“ ‘ Fishy ’ ! You to the guest-room upstairs, the one above mine. Alek ! Issue the arms, then report to me ! ”

“ You can be of use too,” he had noticed Krystyna. “ You can hand out the ammo. Only go carefully, keep away from the windows.”

As she ran downstairs she passed two men hurrying to their posts. Alek was waiting at the bottom. He had already brought out and distributed the arms, now he was dragging ammunition chests from the cupboard under the stairs.

“ These larger clips are for the Bren ; that’s upstairs, the room opposite yours The smaller ones are for ‘ Fishy ’ ; he’s the lanky fellow, in the guest-room, above the lieutenant’s.” . . . Here, wait a bit, girl. We’ll put them in this basket.”

“ The smaller for ‘ Fishy ’ . . . ” she repeated to herself, as she ran upstairs with the heavy burden. She did not hear her own steps, only the beating of her heart sounded above the chatter of the Bren echoing between frequent dashes of silence.

Vaska was a good shot, he had cat’s eyes, and the forest-dweller’s instinct. He broke off, raised the barrel resting on the window ledge, and picked out the shadows leaping over the streaks of moonlight. Nothing, all calm, all quiet. Suddenly the nightjar sounded from the opposite side : short and insistent. Then a response somewhere close by, to the left—from beyond that pine, surely ?

He adjusted the sight, but did not pull the trigger : ragged firing ringed the villa—rifles, and . . . yes, from the kitchen direction, a Russian automatic pistol.

Marek recognized it by its ringing, almost faintly hissing note. Two bursts went into the wall, the next was just above his head, the fourth sprinkled splinters of glass from the window. The later bursts were better aimed ; they whistled unpleasantly, pecking at the plaster, ruining the furniture and holing the pictures.

He drew his head away from the window. Alek was lurking on the other side. He knelt down and rested the Schmeisser at an angle on the window frame. He looked at his commander expectantly, avidly.

" Who are they ?" he asked.

" Bah ! Would I like to know !"

' Tec ' waited phlegmatically ; two windows to defend, one in the front, one at the side. But he had a powerful weapon, a Bren gun like Vaska's. Several bullets had whistled into the room already, but they were fired from a distance, and at a rising angle.

The old gangster made himself thoroughly secure, with all the prudence of the professional. He took the mattresses from the beds, used three chairs as a foundation, and the result was two excellent breastworks, fortified firepoints. On the table were the five magazines Krystyna had brought , on the window sills lay German hand grenades, safety catches released, the strings hanging evenly, ready to be tugged before the throw.

' Tec ' waited a little longer, watching the line of the palings.

" These aren't . . . for me . . . " ' Dewy ' said, handing the magazines back to Krystyna. " I've got . . . a Bergman . . . a

much longer . . . clip . . . But first bring me . . . some water ; you'll find it . . . in the kitchen, by the . . . stove."

"Water?" Krystyna wondered.

"Yes ; I've got hiccups awful bad."

Up here things were quieter, there was no one to fire at. The room was disordered : the bedclothes had shifted to the window—palliasse, blankets, pillows.

Krystyna's mind was confused, though her heart beat regularly : "Marek will manage with these men, they're brave. And they've got plenty of ammunition." . . . "But those outside? My God! They're Poles too!" She drew out a further box of ammunition : perhaps these were for the Bergman ; there might be some writing on them to tell by. "No, these are too small, surely. I must ask Alek."

She rose from her knees, but drew back at once. A roar exploded close to her ; it was repeated again and again, the blast thrust her against the wall. "O, Jesus! Have they hit Marek?"

"Don't come in here! Down to the floor!" Korda shouted as he saw her peering into the room. "We've got enough ammo here, please withdraw at once. Back, back! Under the stairs!"

Alek stopped firing for some time, he was probably changing a clip. The attack died down too, the Schmeisser had driven them off.

"Mr. Marek!" she called ; "Clips for the Bergman! I can't find them."

"Just a second ; take it easy. Alek will show you."

Now Villa 'Melania' was firing with all its armoury. Two Schmeissers, the Bren, the drumming Bergman---'Tec' had caught sight of figures approaching the palings. 'Dewy', a bit of a philosopher, had begun very reluctantly ; but now

he was firing blindly, spraying bullets over the widest possible area. It wasn't worth picking out targets : after all, they weren't Germans. Vaska sprayed the road leading to the garage : his tracer bullets twinkled greenly, the crimson tongue darted out again and again from the narrow window opening. Suddenly it vanished : the Bren spat, snorted once more, then was silent.

" They've taken Vaska from the rear," Marek said.

" Looks like it. Or else he's used up all his ammo. He never knows how much he's got left."

Alek was about to lean out and fire a further burst. Marek stopped him :

" Leave the Schmeisser and go and see about the Bergman. Go up to ' Dewy ' yourself, the girl's not to do it. And bring me some grenades."

Alek had hardly left the room when Marek was heavily engaged with fire from an automatic pistol and several rifles. He could not reply at once, for the fire was now coming from close at hand, round the kitchen outbuilding.

He knelt down on both knees, his palms on the floor, and crawled on all fours under the window. He was about to get up and take aim with his rifle when the firing suddenly stopped. His ears caught a well-known, rushing hiss : he fell flat, tucking his head down behind an overturned chair. The grenade flew in an arc to burst against the opposite wall.

When he heard the grenade burst in the room beneath him ' Fishy ' stopped firing from the back window, and ran to the window on the kitchen side. But he could not do much. Two attackers had already leapt on to the ledge of the ground floor window ; before he could point the barrel downward they were in the room.

The gangster glanced towards the woodshed, then to the

left : just in time to send a sharp burst, cutting off the advance of a further group. They withdrew towards the kitchen. He went on firing his Schmeisser, ranging it left and right, with broad sweeps, like a scythe.

" Mr. Marek ! Marek !" Krystyna called, deafened by the explosion. Darkness : the blast had put out the lamp in the ante-room, the only light in the besieged villa. The taste of dust in the air, smoke tingling the eyes. Behind her lids a nightmare : a bloody scrap of a man. It passed at once. Alek shone a torch, stabbing the darkness with its stiletto beam. He found and picked out a white face :

" It's Marek."

" I'm coming, lieutenant."

Marek did not hear the call, nor the shots, nor the explosion : for a long, weird quarter of an hour, so far as he was concerned the fight would be only a play of lights, a movement of bodies and things, the cold feel of his pistol-barrel, sensations, nagging thoughts, and scents : now of the girl giving him her hand, then of dust, plaster, burnt powder.

" Put out the light ! Take to the stairs !" he shouted, but he did not hear his own voice.

" Give me the torch !" he seized it with his left hand, and shone it downward from the half-landing. Beside him were Krystyna, and Alek with a grenade in one hand.

" Don't throw it ! Wait !" He restrained Alek's too impatient movement.

" Now, take cover !" he pushed Krystyna up the next flight of stairs.

Krystyna looks none the less, peers with one eye round the corner, huddled, shaken, but still curious.

Gleams of a torch : as brief as thought, cautious, lost in the emptiness, the gloom. Then a longer beam, a burst of

fire from a barrel, a shot—a cry of pain from downstairs. Again Marek fires: that bullet also hits its mark; it sends someone down with a dull, hollow thud.

In Krystyna's room 'Spider' hadn't much to do; beneath him 'Dewy' was blazing away prodigally on both fronts. Now, catching the sound of battle on the stairs, he ran out on to the landing, a pistol in each hand.

Alek not so much recognized as sensed 'Spider' as he ran down to the half-landing. "Give me your revolver," he ordered. Then—

"Lieutenant, 'Spider's' here; might we dash downstairs?"

Marek heard not one word; only when he was tugged by his sleeve did he shine the torch upward.

"Ah, so 'Spider's' here! Good!" he said. "Go with Alek and see what's happened down below. Take alive anyone wounded. I shall be on the first floor."

"But you remain sitting here!" he added sharply as he brushed against Krystyna.

In the ante-room to the kitchen Alek and 'Spider' found no one. In total darkness they groped round all the familiar corners. After some time one of them lit his lighter; the tiny flame dimly revealed the scene of emptiness and destruction in Marek's room.

Alek found the paraffin lamp hanging on the wall; it was undamaged, no splinters had reached that corner. He lit it and looked about him: distinct tracks of blood led from the shattered door of Marek's room to the foot of the stairs. The rest of the passage was lost in gloom.

The firing outside had died away for a moment or two; into the silence wormed a rustle, from the kitchen, surely, or perhaps from the lieutenant's room? Another rattle of

heavy fire, some of the shots very close ; now the automatic pistol crack-cracked again.

Alek nudged ' Spider ' :

" You look in the kitchen. I'm going for the Schmeisser."

The kitchen door was open ; through the window of the penthouse—it was shut, but not blacked out—soaked a pallid moon, cold and indifferent, unresponsive to human affairs, to the shots, and the bloodstains congealing on the floor.

' Spider ' crossed the kitchen in a stride or two. He pushed open the yard door, which the retreating enemy had unbolted a few minutes before. He picked them out at once against the white wall of the garage one of them was supporting his wounded comrade, who was bent double over the helping arm. He ran out a few paces after them, but not far, for fear of coming under ' Tec's ' fire. He opened up a little too late. the two figures were vanishing behind the palings. He aimed at the unwounded man, but the bullets went to one side of him, to be returned in a salvo of enemy fire. Something tore at his lungs he fell headlong. Before a feather-bed of oblivion fell over him his ears caught the explosion of a bunch of grenades, somewhere to the right, in the garden.

The flames burst up in front of Marek unexpectedly and quietly. a bouquet of crimson in various hues, leaping up into the greyness of the house, the blackness of the night, to the background music of the bells bursting his brain. The woodshed had been set on fire ; and it was used as a storehouse for booty and spare petrol. The fire at once took hold frenziedly, greedily : it licked the pine beams, the tar-paper of the roof, the frames of the window and door. It reached out to the cans under the tarpaulins, and at once shot up in a plume of paler, but more venomous flame to spread far and wide, to lick round bales of cloth, and to go on lurking and starting up in the ashes for the rest of the night and longer.

On that side of the garden the firing died away. Marek had no consciousness of that ; deafened by the explosion of the grenade, only now was he slowly returning to the world of sounds by way of a violent ringing in the head. The visible reality—the dancing flames and sparks, the leaping and running of human shapes in the garden and beyond the palings—was overwhelmed by the thunder of the bells that beat in his head like the over-amplified sound track of a film.

His eyes functioned swiftly and efficiently. He picked out the men hiding behind trees now splashed with the rosy glare of the fire. He saw one man distinctly : an angular, solid patch. He raised his pistol. " Who am I firing at ? " the question stung his mind. But it was too late : the target sagged, fell away from the pine, sullied the littered pine needles with the stillness of sudden death.

" He's paid his bill ! " Alek thought, delighted with the accuracy of his burst. After finding the Schmeisser he had not gone back to ' Spider ', since the flaming woodshed provided a good opportunity for effective fire. He knelt down behind the window sill and plugged away steadily, not sparing his ammunition. Krystyna, active again, handed him clips.

Now Marek was with ' Fishy ' in the first-floor room. He gazed into the garden, seeking a target. The song of the bells had died down, had softened and faded in his head. Instead, his ears picked out the first fugitive rattle of ' Fishy's ' Schmeisser, then Alek's, and then the Bren, the Russian automatic, the Bergman. Bursts long and short, isolated shots—they swelled and rose and took on volume ; now they were rattling away briskly, heavier and louder.

He went on a tour of inspection. His mind was seething with fresh energy, seeking means of settling the issue, the correct tactic, the key to the situation.

The key was in Station Street, where there was a rhythmic roar of engines. The German lorries drove out of their barracks and moved rapidly along the street, their headlamps full on.

Jozek, lurking by the main road, was the first to see them. He was angry at having to fire, but he did not hesitate. Kneeling down behind a pile of gravel, he followed the course of the headlamps: at this late hour they must be German military cars. He reckoned the distance. One moment more: let them pass that house.

" Aim at their eyes ! Fire ! "

' Tec ' had a perfect ear. He put down his Bren and turned to Marek.

" What's up ? " Marek asked.

" Can't you hear ? "

Korda listened with all the strength of his restored eardrums.

" That must be on the Royal Road. That alters the situation. "

" It's their cover, " ' Tec ' declared. " They've come up against the Germans. "

Now Marek could distinguish close and distant shots. The firing in the distance was in various tones, a solid and considerable force.

" That's fine ! " he said at last. " They'll have to withdraw. "

" But go on firing for the time being, " he added. " Don't give them any rest. "

" Mr. Marek, " Krystyna said, when they happened to meet by the ammunition chests downstairs. " There's one man missing ; the one that was firing from my room. "

" ' Spider ' ? "

" I think that's what you call him."

" Good, I'll find out at once."

He bent over ' Spider ' ; the youngster was still alive, but he was in a bad way. He lay doubled up, his head down to his knees, indifferent to everything.

" Where are you hit ?" Marek asked, putting his hand on ' Spider's ' head.

The only answer was a mutter—a request, a groan, a complaint ? All his body was quivering.

" Don't be afraid," Korda whispered, " we'll get you bound up at once."

He put his hands under the wounded man's armpits and dragged him into the kitchen, carefully, slowly ; no one fired in his direction.

A whistle suddenly sounded from the forest-- prolonged, a piercing blast on a metal whistle. Marek put ' Spider ' down, straightened up, and listened.

As the shooting died away further whistles sounded louder. The only fire now was from the villa ; but one of the partisans was sending tracer bullets into the air, signalling withdrawal and concentration.

From his station Jozek could not hear the whistle, but he caught sight of the crimson dots sprinkling the sky above the forest.

" Another five minutes !" he shouted above the rattle of his machine-gun and the whistle of German bullets striking against the gravel.

" Pack up ! Four more rounds, then we clear."

The deep ditch behind them assured their successful retreat.

Krystyna bandaged the wounded man, not very expertly, but with great enthusiasm ; she had been trained in the

conspiratorial school, but had had no practice. Alek supported the groaning man while she worked with rolls of gauze and German bandages.

Outside, there was a lull : the rustle of the pines was returning, drawing closer again, sounding stronger now that the moon was hidden behind a thick patch of cloud. The muffled rattle of machine-guns still echoed in the distance ; from the villa it seemed almost unreal, theatrical, empty of threat.

But now the forest began to come to life : a nightjar to right and left ; a pause ; a nightjar more distant, and, still farther off, a nightjar replied. The whistles tended to come together eastward. They died away. In a minute or two the nightjars would be migrating from Milanowa.

Lieutenant Jontek brought up the rear of the retreat, as befits a good commander. He was furious with his superiors for sending him this urgent, impossible order, with his own men for muffing the attack, as he thought, and with the Germans who had spoilt everything by intervening too soon.

He was seriously afraid that he might not have time to assemble his scattered detachment and retire to the safer forest before dawn. He had whistled vigorously to signal the retreat : now he was hurrying his men, listening to determine where the nightjar calls were coming from, fixing the range of their open formation. And he was thinking of his losses. Two men had been left dead in the garden. But that was nothing ; what of his wounded ?

He had gone no more than a hundred yards when the first indication came : a groan as he accidentally touched someone.

" Who's there ? " he asked, standing over a black patch that barred the road.

" It's me, Isidor." A form emerged from the darkness, rising from the black mass below.

"Who's the other?"

"Walek. He's wounded; I had to put him down."

"Can't he go on?"

"No; he's hardly breathing."

A brief flash from Jontek's torch, a swift glance.

"Leave him and get on."

Silence, clearly indicating hesitation.

"Now, get off; make yourself scarce."

Jontek waited a second or two. Then he bent over the wounded man, undid his sheepskin, and felt in his jacket. All well: he found papers, a letter, a note-case. He flashed his torch; in his hand was a bloodstained identity card.

He knelt down beside his 'adjutant'. The shot was muffled: the barrel was barely an inch from the head.

The lieutenant strode away swiftly, his revolver in his belt; the documents—a partisan's legacy—in his pocket.

26

MAREK removed the dead partisan's red armlet and put it in his pocket. He was grateful to Jate and Salinski for sending a Communist and not a Home Army detachment against him. The vague feeling of distaste which he had felt during the struggle had almost completely left him.

"But the old boy's got some useful contacts!" he thought as he returned to the house. "I wonder who arranged this little job for him?"

There was no time to look for the answer now. The moment the Germans intervened it was obvious that his only chance of escaping with his men was to evacuate the villa at once. The partisan rearguard would be withdrawing in a

minute or two, and the Germans would have as little difficulty in finding 'Melania' as a fire brigade would. And he had no intention of taking on a whole company of Wehrmacht or several squads of gendarmerie.

His men were already preparing for evacuation, in anticipation of his orders. 'Spider' was lying bandaged in the kitchen, with a greatcoat over him; Krystyna had made him ready for the journey. Alek had collected the weapons and ammunition in the passage leading to the kitchen, the ammunition chests, the two Schmeissers, the Bren and the Bergman were piled ready for departure. 'Tec' had vanished into his room to pack his personal fortune. When he came out he had changed his clothes, and was a different character, with a good-quality light autumn coat, a case in one hand, a cap on his head: the common type of second-class passenger to be found at any railway station. Marek entered from the kitchen.

"What will you be taking with you, lieutenant?" Alek asked.

"My smaller suitcase. But deal with that later: we must make sure about the truck first."

They all hurried anxiously to the garage. They had just passed through the wicket-gate when the distant concert of machine-guns suddenly died away, then stopped completely. At the same moment a flame leaping from the woodshed took hold of a nearby pine, and almost at once it was transformed into a giant crimson torch.

'Tec' hurried on ahead and began to tug at the garage doors, which were bolted on the inside. Alek brought up a crowbar, the doors were forced open. Marek shone his torch inside.

Vaska's body emerged in the foreground, as though he were still guarding the truck. His enormous carcass was flung across the bonnet, like a giant mastiff, helpless but faithful unto death, poisoned by burglars before their break-in.

The attitude of the body high up on the bonnet amazed and horrified : an extraordinary commingling of metal and massive shoulders, bushy brow a great mass of human flesh hanging down without trace of a blow or shot, an inert body which only a few minutes before had been throbbing with desire for life and struggle. " How did he get there ?" Krystyna wondered ; she did not notice the overturned chair on which he must have been standing when they attacked him from the rear, from the opposite window.

" What are you gaping at ?" ' Tec ' snarled at Alek, who was standing in the silent tribute due to death, wherever and whosoever it may be. He seized Vaska by the legs and dragged him off the bonnet with a rough, contemptuous movement.

" Poor old Vaska !" Alek said quietly, in a strained voice.

' Tec ' climbed into the cabin, ' Fishy ' checked up the petrol in the tank, ' Dewy ' went round the truck with a torch, examining the tyres. Everything was in order ; only the holes in the tarpaulin roof testified to the heavy fire that had come through the windows.

A few moments later the gangsters' truck turned to the left into the side road. The Germans were already coming up from the opposite direction ; the beams of their headlamps came round the corner just too late to pick up the shape of the truck speeding through the darkness.

' Tec ', who, as usual was driving, had no doubt of the direction to take. Marek was not in the least surprised when, after driving some distance over a quiet field road, at the main road he turned to the right. They were going to Warsaw : that was not open to question. They were children of the city, their instinct guided them infallibly in the direction of their own town, whose friendship has been freely extended for centuries to the light-hearted and the bold, to the many who, though not always inspired by noble sentiments, have loved their freedom.

Korda felt sure they would be able to avoid, or in any case could break through the German guards at the city bounds, with such a strong force he would have undertaken to drive the truck right through the city and across one of the river bridges to the other side and beyond, despite the curfew and the heavily reinforced patrols. "But what then?" he pondered.

Ideas and schemes teemed in his head, but all in vague terms, fantastic and hazy. The rhythm of travel—fairly fast, but disturbed by unexpected jolts from potholes and by 'Spider's' groans—did not conduce to concentrated thought. But it did tend to increase his fury with Salinski.

"The swine, the double-crosser, the skunk!" He would have sworn violently if Krystyna had not been in the truck. The ancient offence—the suppressed hatred and ineffable contempt always felt for our own failings or secret inclinations when we note them in others, especially in our enemies—came uppermost, to be vented on Salinski. It began with a torrent of abuse, passed into emotional reactions that spurred on his mind, and finally took shape in a clear decision, the prerequisite of action. By the time the truck was passing through the next village he knew exactly where he would take his men.

There remained the question of what to do with Krystyna and 'Spider'. He was not worried about the others—they would follow him anywhere.

Krystyna seemed to feel that he was thinking about her. "Where are we going?" she asked, shifting nearer to him.

"To Warsaw, for the present at any rate."

"What about the wounded man?"

"I don't know yet; we'll see."

Another violent jolt. 'Tec' slowed down; the road, silvery in the moonlight, sped gently away from them in an arc between trees and fields.

"Lieutenant!" it was 'Dewy' who spoke.

" Well ?"

" We could leave ' Spider ' in Sliska Street, where we used to live."

" Who with ?"

" Genia Jurczyk."

The name seemed familiar. He tried to recall where he had heard it.

" The one that was ' Ape's ' girl ?"

" That's her. A steady sort and reliable. There's a large courtyard there too ; we could drive right in, and even leave the truck there."

" It's a good idea ; knock through to ' Tec '."

When she heard ' Dewy ' give the name, address, and a brief character-sketch of the gangster's moll, Krystyna expected to be taken to the worst sort of hide-out. She was agreeably surprised. Genia Jurczyk's little home—she had two rooms, a kitchen, and a small scullery—was a model of cleanliness and Warsaw suburban comfort, not of the highest class, of course, but in the middle or lower-middle class range.

Genia was a plump and good-looking woman about twenty-five years old, with a little snub nose and cornflower-blue eyes. Her cherry-coloured woollen jumper fitted closely to her well-shaped, mature figure. She readily took charge of ' Spider '. He was carried into the bedroom, and while Marek and his men went into the kitchen for food and a council of war, Krystyna had time enough to look round the small sitting-room where ' Ape's ' former girl was living modestly on the rest of her savings.

The room was spotlessly clean, and marked with little coquettish touches, but not of this modern age. About it was an air of the nineteenth century, revealed in the furniture, the pictures, and the family portraits. A wine-coloured plush sofa, showing signs of tiredness but still serviceable, and easy chairs to match ; they were adorned with touches of colour

from later historical periods : a lemon-yellow clown, possibly a gift from ' Ape ' ; and cushions of a cold, killing blue.

The old-fashioned, solid chiffonier drew Krystyna's eyes as if it were a domestic altar. In the very centre of it was the chief relic : a silver-wedding garland under a glass cloche. A little higher, on a small shelf by itself, was a gilt clock in a cheaply ornate style, obstinately indicating twelve o'clock of a day long past. On the left-hand side, in green plush frames, were still unfaded wedding photographs : the lady of the house, in a white veil, holding a bouquet of lilies ; and the bridegroom, much older, with a bucolic face, and attired in solemn black, and a stiff collar with an enormous black bow. In his hands was a bowler hat—the Sunday covering for his eggshaped pate.

Krystyna gazed at this idyllic picture with a touch of sympathy : the Jurczyks in their frame had a pious, honest, and extraordinarily solid look. She could not know that this lawful wedded husband was only a shade, long since eclipsed for Genia by a different, firm and bold face, which stared out of a second plush frame sentimentally draped with a large black crêpe cockade. ' Ape ', masculine and authoritative, smiled aggressively and a little sarcastically, as though saying :
" What's any old Jurczyk got over me ? "

Krystyna, freshened by the night journey, and still feeling restless, had just ended her hurried examination of the room when Marek entered.

She could see that he had come to some decision. His knitted brows, his cold eyes, all his concentrated, handsome face told her that. Through the open door came a murmur of excited voices, vehement exclamations, ' Tec's ' laugh, curt, ominous. She tried to catch Korda's eye ; she was afraid to ask questions, she tried to decipher him with her gaze.

He took no notice of her, but walked across the room and opened the bedroom door.

" Mrs. Jurczyk ! " he called authoritatively.

She appeared at once, graceful and attractive, still

coquettish even now, swinging her hips.

"How is he?"

"I think he's better; he's got a tight grip of life. He'll be going off to sleep soon, I've given him some vodka."

"D'you know any doctor?"

"There's one just opposite. He attended my dead man last year, when his ear was torn. I'll run across for him; he's young, but good."

"Fine!" Marek said. "By the way," he went on after a pause while he regarded the dead gangster's photograph; "I met your husband in Szucha a few days before his execution."

"Did you really? You met Mateusz?" She turned pale with excitement and stared at him fervently, almost painfully.

"Yes. I knew him before. He gave me a message for you. More than once I intended to come and see you, but something always turned up to prevent me."

She leaned against an arm-chair. Little sparks—of sentiment, greed, or still living passion—glittered in her eyes.

"Did he mention me, then?" she asked very quietly, letting her head droop.

"Yes, and more than that, he thought of your future, he asked me to see about it."

She sat down in the chair, obviously taken aback. Her head raised and her lips slightly apart, she looked as though posing for a picture to be entitled 'Expectation'. But she was to be disillusioned.

"We'll have to talk about it later," he went on impatiently. "Now run for the doctor. We're going on at once. But this young lady will remain here." He looked at Krystyna.

"Mr. Marek," she burst out; "I'm going with you."

"That's out of the question. You must remain here."

"But why, Marek; why?" She held out her hands to him in a pleading, timid gesture.

"It'll be better for you that way," he said gently.

He turned back to Genia, who was still enveloped in a haze of memories and vague hopes. His look brought her to her feet.

"I'm just going."

She went into the bedroom to put on her coat. Korda waited for her to go. He looked at Krystyna : girlish, fragile, ardent with anxiety, with yearning, with first sorrowful love for him. Their eyes met for a second. "A good kid!" It was only the shadow of a thought, a hint of oversimplified sympathy, of masculine arrogance, protective tenderness.

Genia returned from the bedroom and went out. When she had gone, he put his arm round Krystyna in a brief, magnanimous embrace. he paid her off with a kiss as if it were largesse.

27

HE WAS plunging into ever deeper and gloomier depths. he had left the daughter behind in order to settle accounts with the father. Not those open, ordinary accounts which judges examine in the light of justice, settling them in accordance with the laws of God, of man, or even of the tribe. He was about to settle quite private interests, applying the judgment of vengeance and violence, after a trial by a gangster jury.

Burning with fury, fresh from the heat of battle, through the darkened streets of Warsaw they drove : both accuser and judge, both jury and executioners.

In that drive to Salinski's apartment 'Tec' took the quietest streets. After a few minutes they turned left into

Krakowskie Street, and drew up outside the house.

Five men jumped out on to the sidewalk - swift, mobile patches, clearly visible only close at hand. With a clatter of hurried footsteps they vanished into the darkness of the gateway.

The distant, muffled buzz of a bell, as sound accompaniment. Then silence, broken by the shuffle of slippers, unhurried, official. A key grates in the gate lock, two turns of the key; the second lets the light through the wicket gate. A feeble gleam, dimly lighting an old, bewhiskered head, barely more than an outline. The porter's voice:

"Ah, it's you, sir . . . come in . . . But these gentlemen?"

"We're all together; we've come to the casino."

The feeble light sweeps over them as they pass through one after another. The crash of the wicket gate, then quietness, darkness.

Upstairs to the first floor; the main flight taken by 'Fishy' and 'Dewy'; the backstairs leading to the kitchen, by Korda, Alek and 'Tec'.

Outside the kitchen door a cheap electric lamp, a dreary, poverty-stricken light. A finger presses the bell: this time without hesitating, not as on a previous occasion.

The sound of a bolt, then the latch:

"Who's there?" A young voice, tremulous with fear.

"It's me! Please open."

A bolt hurriedly shot back. The lock sighs with relief.

"Mr. Marek! How you did frighten me!"

The maid's face, pale, still rigid with fear, but coming to life again with a dawning smile.

"Is Mr. Salinski in?"

"He's in the hall."

"Ask him to come to his office."

At the front door the casino porter bows a welcome to new guests. He conducts them to the left, attempts to take

their hats and coats.

" No need !" says ' Dewy '.

His Schmeisser barrel presses against the dress waistcoat. The blood rushes to the terrified servant's feet ; his eyes goggle, fear twists his lips.

" Keep your trap shut ! Stick em up !"

' Fishy ' turns the puppet with one sharp twist. ' Dewy's ' barrel gives him his direction : right, to the small front room.

" Not a sound from you, or . . . !" The door is closed, the key turned in the lock.

The door to the gaming hall is opened with an impatient push. Chatter, smoke, the heat of gambling bursts through. In the foreground are two heads ; over ' Dewy's ' shoulder ' Fishy ' recognizes the director.

" The bastard's here all right. Wait !"

They stand and look about them, two new gamblers seeking acquaintances among the flaming faces. They see the maid's apron close to Salinski's belly ; she is whispering something , his face reveals his astonishment. He turns round, showing the broad expanse of his back beneath his black coat. He pushes sidelong through the press of visitors, and vanishes into a room opposite.

Another door opens : from the dining-room to the office. Two pairs of shoulders seen from the back : Salinski's in the foreground, astonished and irresolute ; beyond him Marek's, hunched, by the desk. A crash of the door , the key turned in the lock ends the sequence, or, rather, opens the next.

A hand gripping a pistol emerges from the dusk ; ' Tec ' thrusts the barrel into the director's flabby side, a little too hard, so sincere and fervent is the movement. A sudden turn, but checked, only an impulse to turn, suppressed by a second thrust of the black barrel.

" Marek ! What does all this mean ?"

Silence. A strange grouping : four men seen from the rear, with all the expression conveyed by their shoulders,

sloping and square, with thin, fat, and muscular arms. The fat, short arms are raised and thrown out in a question mark : uncertain, yet overdone, stupidly theatrical.

" Mr. Korda, what is it you want ?"

Marek turns round sharply, seizes Salinski by his coat lapels ; he draws the living sack towards him till face is close to face.

" You filthy skunk !"

Two profiles close together : fury, and terror ; but the terror still vigilant, ready to seize on any expedient.

The younger man lets his hands drop, and stares at his ' employer ' with eyes flaming with vengeance, tinged with contempt.

" Just a little ' private initiative ', Mr. Salinski. I suppose you thought it was all over and done with, you'd put paid to my account. No, my fine gentleman : it's my habit to close every account. I don't recognize unpaid debts," he pauses and smiles venomously. " Like you, I know how to take what's due to me,"

" But Marek, I don't understand . . . we were friends . . . think . . . pause . . ." In his search for the right tone, the sound countermove, his fleshy lips blurt out the words. The eyes, crafty and swift, watch his enemy's face from beneath blinking lids. Now he finds the riposte : attack is the best defence.

" I warn you. I've got some pretty good protection in my flat to . . ."

He does not get out all the last word, the syllable is throttled by Marek's hand gripping his tie ; the silver knot is pulled forward, bringing the head with it. Silence for a few seconds : face once more close to face, the lower one fat, a bluish tinge, the higher one flaming with anger. Then a push : athletic, full from the shoulder. The human sack falls into Alek's grasp ; ' Tec ' turns it round and fells it with a swinging blow.

Salinski falls headlong, his carcass stretched out over the green carpet, like a great worm with bleeding head. Three heads bent over him, motionless but ominous, supported on fore-shortened shoulders and outstretched arms.

In that attitude they were caught by the 'warning'. The wail of the sirens covered the city with a garment of sound, tightly woven though supple, penetrating into the room in the register of a dull, muffled contralto. Four heads turned to the window; the wormy shape started up from the floor, to fall back on to the carpet, sent down by a kick from 'Tec'.

"Bring him along!" Marek shouted.

They ran out, pushing the casino director before them. As he went his note-case and watch changed owners: 'Tec' picked them cleanly from his jacket pocket.

In the dining-room, a foretaste of terror. the siren's wail as the base of the wave, above it foaming crests of hubbub, faint as yet, dammed by the door and the portière curtain.

Marek gave a violent tug. The rag of heavy material went flying, together with the rod. The double doors were locked. A resolute charge with the shoulder, and the two wings fly open, greeted by the sudden tumult of the startled gamblers.

The hall of the casino is a brawling swarm, into which fate has flung the air-raid warning, the apprehension of bombs, of sudden death flying over Warsaw.

"Keep calm, ladies and gentlemen!" the croupier, or one of the visitors, shouts. "Everybody will go down to the shelter."

"Not one of you move! Put them up!" Schmeisser barrels, impenetrable barriers, at the door.

Some of the swaying throng fall back to the door where Marek is standing. Alek's and 'Tec's' pistols send them reeling away again.

Chips, colourful tears, scattered over the tables. Here a

purse ; there a note-case ; a lady's handbag.

Cwierski's whiskers, drooping, frightened ; below them rapacious hands collecting banknotes.

Knapp, pale but calm, opens his mouth again. Next to him, Fantulis, huddled, his bald head drawn right down on to his chest.

The crash of a broken chair : some stout woman fights her way to the door. Seen in close up her face is flabby, inhuman ; white indiarubber and beads of sweat.

A hysterical shriek from the far end of the table : probably old Golocka. Van Loos soothes her, in Dutch.

A hand trembling ; another clenched nervously. Faces twisted with fear , words, phrases in French, curses in Polish.

At the door a Prussian junker draws his pistol : it goes, flying up towards the ceiling, knocked out of his hand by ' Fishy '. A jangle of glass from the lamp above the table ; the light suddenly dimmed ; the black Mauser falls on the floor, among the chips and the splinters of broken cups.

The crowd surges towards the door, but the powerful dam will not let them pass. " Stand back ! Everybody lie down ! " from ' Fishy ' and ' Dewy '.

The siren dies away, starts up, but breaks off. Instead of silence, a crash. The oak buffet is overturned before the pressure of arms and legs ; the hors d'œuvres, the plates and dishes slither down, the broken glasses jingle.

Half the hall is almost empty : all the mob is packed tightly at one end. Only one or two people are left at the baccarat table.

Marek with his assistants standing at the door ; the stupefied Salinski goggling with uncomprehending eyes at the catastrophe.

Korda runs his eyes over the well-known den : a chaos of confusion and ruin ; human cattle in convulsions of fear ; furniture overturned, yet still the only calm note, though abandoned, forgotten by the guests. On the wall a mirror,

in it the reflection of a face, a form . . .

“ My God ! ”

Pushed by Marek's hand, Salinski staggers away. Korda steps forward, five sure, stiff steps, the steps of an automaton, of a phantom not of this world.

The woman rises from her chair, they stand face to face. Between them the green baize of the table, half-empty glasses ; over them the siren once more, now in the note of ' raiders overhead ', howling fiendishly—an accompaniment to the throbbing engines of Russian planes.

Von Wiesen springs bravely to his feet and raises his revolver. The shot goes into the ceiling ; he drops, sent flying by Alek.

Marek's gaze takes in all of the woman before him : her face, inscrutable ; her hands, musical poems ; her large eyes, inexpressibly beautiful, a thousand times accursed. They stare at each other across a sea of hatred . . . or of love. A silence prolonged beyond endurance, overstrained with the strength of their feeling, tense with accumulated passion.

The first bomb whistles down, and bursts : liberation, catharsis. From the herd comes a roar like an echo : “ Let us out ! ” For a moment ' Fishy ' is taken aback and lowers his automatic pistol. Fatal : the herd rushes at him, overthrows him, treads on him ; they stream down the stairs.

Marek snatches out his pistol ; he has not touched it before. His arm moves slowly upward ; he is in no hurry, he is still trying to decipher that inscrutable face.

The screaming whistle, the roar, the thunder of a bomb : beams and furniture flying, a chaos of bodies and objects ; grey dust filling the room solidly, impenetrably. Over everything, living and dead, it draws a curtain.